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Elfwin

Her century is a small dark cloud,
Where the tortured trumpets scream aloud,
And the dense arrows drive.

G. K. CHESTERTON

ELFWIN

A Romance of History

BY

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

Author of

"DELUGE," "DAWN," ETC.

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ELFWIN

BOOK ONE

CHAPTER I

ETHELFLEDA of Mercia sat the black Welsh pony which she had taken twelve months earlier from the King of Gwent, and looked across the frozen meadows at the stockaded gate of Derby, from which her army had been driven four times since morning.

She had come there in the early dawn of the winter day, from the mass at which the abbot Theobald had blessed her troops, to observe, and by her presence to inspire, the expected victory. For her part was done. Hers had been the audacious plan, the unexcusing levy, the concentration at Tamworth where the great roads meet, the rapid march urged relentlessly through the mire of the winter ways. The strategy had been always hers, even when Ethelred lived. But the actual fighting was for her thanes to order. Was — or had been. For now the sun was setting behind her, and the four battle-thanes of Mercia lay dead in the Derby streets.

There she had sat since morning, silent and motionless, with eyes that never wavered from the city gate. It was as though she saw a vision of victory, or looked for a success which would be lost if once her eyes should fall, or her faith should falter.

Thus she had sat, and seen the first rush of Ethred and his chosen followers surmount the gate, and storm their way into the stronghold of the Danes. Thus she had watched as the noise of battle clamoured within the city. Thus she had seen the out-flung remnant of her troops straggle backward from their repulse. But Ethred had not returned.

Then she had looked at Ethelgarth, and spoken nothing, but with that slight imperious motion of her hand, which all men knew, she had pointed to the city gate, and he had marshalled her broken troops as best he might, and led them on, and they too had stormed the gate, and they too had straggled back at the last, a broken remnant of what they had been. But Ethelgarth had not returned.

And after that, twice more. Offa and Ethelheld, they had gone the same road, they had led good men to the same measure of success, and, in the end, to the same deaths; and they had not returned.

The four battle-thanes of Mercia, the four captains she trusted, and on whom she leaned, they were all dead today. So many of her best were dead today! And it had all been for nothing. It was a failure, and there was no one round her but knew it. The Danes knew it

also. It had been a hard fight, but they had been ready for her this time. They were busy now killing the badly wounded, as was best and most merciful, throwing out the dead bodies, and repairing the breaches in the stockade. The sound of their axes echoed across the meadow in the clear winter air, above the grass on which the frost was whitening. They lost no time for a needed work, though their arms might be weary. They were professional soldiers, not amateurs like hers.

Her own men, knowing failure, looked to the night, and the morning. They thought of the retreat, and wondered if the Danes would allow them to retire unfollowed. But Ethelfleda looked further. She thought of what the news would mean to the other members of the League of the Five Towns. What it would mean to her brother Edward at Winchester, to the twice-treasoned Gaidhils of the Dee valley, what it would mean in Anglesey, and at Brecknock, to the Britons of Strathclyde — above all, what it would mean at York.

With that capacity for cold, clear thinking which had made her name, as it had made that of her brother, the Wessex king, for twenty years the terror of their all-circling foes, she saw that it was the end.

Widow of a man she had never loved, mother of a child to whom the purpose of her life was nothing, with whom she was at bitter difference, she had given everything to Mercia, as she had promised her father: everything for her mother's land. Everything she had

given, even her body, even her soul — everything but her faith. And here was the end, across this frozen field, and at the gate that she had failed to storm.

Her name had not been linked with failure — not in all these years. Feint or fight, she had met or outmanœuvred the stronger foes by which her land was surrounded on every side but where her brother held the Wessex wolds. She had stormed Brecknock. She had rebuilt Chester. She had combined with Edward in the strategy which had broken the Danish army at Wodensfield. And this winter, in defiance of the elements and all the laws of war, she had thought to have taken one of the Five Towns . . . and it had led to this.

She had called out every man from the lands she ruled, every man of the valleys of Severn, and Trent, and Dee: every man of the Chiltern and Cotswold hills: every man of the Midland weald: every man with feet to move and hands to strike — and she had led them to this.

Because they trusted her they had come, when they might have stayed in the comfort of their winter homes, and in the season when they were secure from every likely foe . . .

Cynfrid came to her pony's shoulder. Someone must speak, for no one knew what to do, if she were silent. There was none to give orders that all would heed. There were so many of those who had been the leaders of yesterday who were only fit to nurse their wounds. There were so many dead.

He spoke with a timid urgency.

"Lady, they are fearful of a night raid. They will not camp so near as last night. There are so few that are fit, and the sun is low. Unless we make order now they will scatter before the morning. Hermild of Chester has loaded his baggage-carts . . ."

He stopped at the abrupt short motion of her bridle-hand, and she looked down, but it was not as though she saw him. He did not know whether she had heard what he said. Then her eyes changed, and she looked at him as though there were only they two in the world.

That was Ethelfleda's way. She moved as one who saw nothing of the life around her: as one who dreamed or prayed; and then, when she spoke to any, it was with a sudden intimacy of recognition, as though everything outside themselves were made distant and small.

She said, "You will stay here and watch. You will let the King know."

She slid down from the pony's back, and gave him the rein to hold. He did not think to question her order, though he did not clearly understand it. He knew that she meant the King her brother, Edward of Wessex. But what was he to watch ?

She looked round at the group of weary and disheartened men who waited on her for the guidance which it seemed that she would not give.

She said, "Where is the flag ?"

There was not much left of the flag of Mercia. It had been seized by Danish hands in that last struggle

in the narrow Derby streets. The man who bore it went down beneath a Danish axe. Edgurth of Crida had snatched at the trailing cloth, and when the Dane who held it dragged upon the staff, it had torn across. And so he had brought half of it away, and now came forward, holding a dirty tattered cloth, fouled green and tarnished gold. It seemed to Ethelfleda, as she took it to her own hands, that it was a symbol of the trampled land that she had failed to save.

Her head bent to kiss it, amid the waiting silence of the group, thane and franklin, freeman and serf, that had crowded round her for guidance. Her lips moved, as though she prayed. "Mary pity . . ." they could hear no more. Men respond quickly to emotion when hearts and bodies are wearied. Thorgild, a blood-grimed freedman of Edgurth's, Worcester-born, but sometimes doubted for a Danish mother and a Danish name, sobbed aloud in the silence.

Ethelfleda lifted her hand, and pointed to the gate, round which so many of her best had died. But no one moved. It was too plainly foolish. Four times that day she had pointed the path of death, and they had taken it — and the most of them had not returned. If from the first time, not from the second: if from the second, not from the third — the fourth. And these were the men that had not crowded forward to the shambles of the stockade, and the Danish axes. They were the men that had lagged: the inevitable rear. And

they were worn out. They had tried a foolish, hopeless thing, because she had bidden them do it, and they had failed — utterly. Everyone knew it, Dane and Saxon alike. Many had known that it must be so when the morning broke. And now the fight was done.

Ethelfleda looked at them and understood. Had she not been able to understand she could not have ruled so long and led so well. She knew that she had no words that could move them.

She turned and went forward over the frozen field.

They watched her for a time in a bewildered silence. She was half-way to the gate before any man moved, and then their thought was to protect and to persuade return rather than to follow her to a fresh assault — that is, if there were any clear thought at all in the little crowd that quickened pace to a run as it became aware of the length by which she led them.

The Danes did not regard her either as she advanced alone; it was only when they saw the running crowd behind that they stopped their work to stare, and then stretched hands for their weapons.

Their cries went backward into the town, to rouse an army that had scattered for food and rest, and part of which had already been withdrawn to its barrack-huts on the further side of the river; for they were no more than the repairing-gang, and a double gate-guard, that first saw the advance across the darkening meadow. But whistles shrilled from point to point, and the Dan-

ish forces, better trained, as they were better weaponed than their Saxon foes, mustered rapidly, and hurried to their stations at the stockade.

For now the whole of the Saxon army — or almost all — was in motion against them. A word had gone backward through the camp that the Queen herself was leading a new assault, and this had changed in the mouths of men, so that the cry sounded, *"the Queen has taken the gate;"* and what man would be last when the fight is done, and a rich town cowers to the spoiler ?

The half-light helped what was already a half-truth as the Saxon army gathered, and poured forward with an impetus that quickened at every pace; for Ethelfleda and her immediate followers were over the gate indeed, changing fierce blows with those who were already there to oppose them.

Cynfrid, holding the pony's rein, and watching as he had been ordered, saw that the gate had been burst, or opened by those who were already within it. The Saxon army poured through.

He waited for half-an-hour, or it might be somewhat longer than that, listening to the noise of battle that roared in the city streets. He was half-minded to go forward, but he saw that the banner of the Five Towns still hung from the square stone keep of the castle within the town, unless the failing light had deceived him. And then he saw that it was descending from the tower of St. Olave's church. The church was much nearer than the castle, and he could see it more clearly. Now

a torn rag fluttered in its place. He knew what that must be, though it was too dark for the reading either of sign or colour.

"Mother of God!" he said, in a voice that trembled, as in a frightened awe, in its reversal of the disaster to which he had believed them fallen, *"she has taken the town."*

CHAPTER II

Guthrum Ericsson, King of East Anglia, sat at meat that afternoon in a small room in the castle of Derby, a stone-built stronghold on the west bank of the Derwent, and at the north end of the town.

He had three companions, as tired and hungry as himself, to share the meal — Jarl Biorn, governor of town and castle; Sithric, King of Northumbria; and Sithric's friend, the viking, Bear Thorkeld.

Guthrum was a burly, slow-speaking man with small shrewd eyes, good-humoured enough unless cruelty could produce a jest, and the best man at a bargain of any Dane in the Danelaw.

He was stirred with a natural anger, for the fighting which had been forced upon them was an outrage upon the experiences of a lifetime, and a transgression of all the laws of war. It was no satisfaction that the audacity had met with its natural disaster; it ought not to have occurred. He felt much as a trade-unionist of a thousand years later might feel if he had been forced to work

overtime without extra payment, or, at least — well, that remained to be talked over.

He looked speculatively at Jarl Biorn. Had the Saxons come three days later, when he would have been on the march to Peterborough, he had a shrewd opinion that the Jarl would have lost the town. If that were admitted, the price of the assistance he had given could be placed at half the spoils it held. He had been too shrewd to move till he was asked. But he knew that the Jarl would not admit anything of the kind. There was substance here for an argument that might last half the night. Well, there was no hurry. He would get the best price he could and without quarrelling. He looked at Biorn's scowling face and he knew that it would be easy to quarrel.

But he was not a fool. He took the chance of the sword when occasion called, as a merchant takes the chance of an ocean freight, but he did not seek it. He would not have been the King of East Anglia had he not been a good man of his hands; he would not have been alive at forty-nine had he not economized in conflict.

Jarl Biorn had good cause to be sulky. He was normally of a morose temperament, one who expected the buffets of fortune before he felt them, but this was ill-luck beyond reason. He had summoned the King's help when the second assault had fought its way to the market-place, and he knew well enough that the tide would have risen to the castle-gate — even had he

stopped it there! — had not King Guthrum, who had been camping on the other side of the river, his huts erected on the site of the ruins of the old Roman town, come at good speed to his rescue. He knew that nine hundred men are not thrown into any fight without a bill to be paid when the time comes for the reckoning — do not wade armpit-deep in ice-cold Derwent water to save the half-hour which it would have taken to go round by the narrow bridge, and forget to ask for something more substantial than gratitude.

Besides, the losses had been heavy, and there is a price on the lives of men. It would be much less than nine hundred that Guthrum would lead out tomorrow on the Icenian Way.

The Jarl had another reason for sulkiness. The left hand of his serf, Axe-flinger, had been cut off at the wrist, and he could never bet again on the skill which had often won him more than he had got as his spoil-share of a Mercian raid. Much may be gained by a boastful-seeming wager, when the night is late, and the horns are empty. . .

With the free manners of a man who is in his own castle, he reached down for a handful of the loose clean straw that rose half-way up the legs of his stool, to wipe a hairy mouth, from which the mead had dribbled. He muttered something about the she-devil frying in her Christian hell.

Bear Thorkeld took up the word. He had no personal interest in the financial questions which were in

the minds of king and jarl. He was here with Sithric by a wandering chance, with their servants only, and any help he had given could be paid by a gift of cloak or chain — or left unpaid as the jarl would. Danes of good birth did not send in bills under such circumstances. Besides, he had his assertion of timidity to maintain. He would be little likely to claim that he had rendered help in the fighting.

He said, "Why don't you end it, once for all? Gwent would help, after what she gave them last winter. How long will the Gaidhil keep her peace, when they hear what's happened today? Sithric here would bring Northumbria in. He wants the girl. We could get up a few coast-raids that would keep Edward too busy to help her. You've got your chance after today. You might win all Mercia to the Thames valley, and the Malvern hills, and let Hereford go to Gwent."

Guthrum nodded speculatively. They were his own thoughts, but more clearly detailed than he had yet formed them. And Thorkeld's judgment was good.

Biorn heard the idea without enthusiasm. It was a matter that had often been discussed among the jarls of the Five Towns, when opportunities of realizing it had not seemed so near. But they had seen disadvantages.

"Garth and wild," he growled, as though in sufficient comment.

Guthrum was more explicit. "You can't raid in the

Danelaw. Mercia breeds, and we salt. Mercia sows, and we reap. It works well enough for us, as it is . . . or it would, but for Ethelwulf's spawn."

That was the trouble. Ethelwulf had been King of Wessex, and his sons after him, one after another, to Alfred, the youngest, and now Alfred's son, Edward, and they had all been alike in their determination to render Wessex unhealthy for the plundering Dane.

But Mercia had been an easy raiding-ground, weak and near and fertile, its king, Burhred, chased overseas, his place taken by their puppet Kelwulf, till Alfred had married his eldest daughter, Ethelfleda, to Ethelred, the Mercian earl, and she had introduced the family habits to her husband's rule. And since Ethelred's death they had learnt that widow may be worse than wife.

. . . That was till today's disaster, which should be the end of that irritation.

Guthrum commented judiciously. He agreed that Mercia could be conquered when the next fighting season should arrive. He thought the necessary alliances could be made. In his heart, he was willing enough. He saw himself as the king of the wider lands. Mercia down, Wessex might follow. That meant fighting. Hard fighting. He did not welcome that. And he saw the advantages of "garth and wild" as well as Biorn — the Danelaw for the peaceful garth, and Mercia for the wild where they could hunt at their leisure. But the hunting had not been very satisfactory during recent

years. No one minded a salt of danger in any sport, or business. But no man would care to hunt under such conditions that he was likely to be carried home on a shutter about twice a week, and a raiding-ground that meant a pitched battle twice a year was about equally objectionable. The Danes had no wish to get killed themselves, nor any great wish to kill Saxons, who might be occupied so much better in growing corn, some at least of which they would be able to keep for their own feeding. That was not only better for them. It was better for both.

But "Ethelwulf's spawn" had never looked at the question in that reasonable spirit.

Here was an instance today. Everyone knew that you couldn't campaign in the winter months. It wasn't done.

When December opened you sat at home, and changed tales, and thanked the gods for a land in which logs were plentiful.

Well, she had got her wages this time, and honest Danes might live more peacefully in the time to come.

Bear Thorkeld began to count on the force that might be called in for the coast-raiding. Besides his own three ships in the Tyne, he knew where several of the more influential vikings had laid up for the winter. And they had four months — or more — to make plans, and to gather crews.

He was one who could never resist planning a fight, though he claimed that he always kept out of it if he

could; and there had been one or two events in his life which might seem to support this view, though there were few who believed them.

Guthrum looked at him speculatively. What had *he* to gain ? He had said that Sithric wanted "the girl." That was Elfwin, of course. Common talk, that. Just the sort of thing to bring a young fool like Sithric into the plan. (But was he a fool ? Elfwin was heiress to Mercia. There was danger there, unless the bargain were clear. He must give more thought to that.) But Bear Thorkeld had no sure lure, and had always avoided Wessex. He would raid in Spain, and on the southern Mediterranean sea-board, and even down the west coast of Africa, facing the unknown seas.

But he had repute, and few quarrels. That was important, for the feuds among the vikings were a perpetual obstacle to united action. If he could get together a really formidable fleet. . . The plan was gaining shape in Guthrum's mind. He looked at Thorkeld, and his small eyes twinkled humorously.

"We all know what Sithric wants; but Bear Thorkeld isn't seeking a Saxon wife. He's got too many in Norway now. . . Besides, they say the Saxon women have different eyes from ours, and — " He left the sentence unfinished, and Thorkeld, who understood it quite well, received its various implications without resentment. He turned his scarred face, with its one good eye, upon the smiling king, but he did not offer the explanation for which he sought.

"You'd find it a good plan," he said carelessly. "But you know your business best."

Bear Thorkeld was the son of Hubba, the viking whose piracies had been the dread of the coasts of south-western Europe half-a-century earlier, and who had died with some hundreds of his companions when the starving garrison of Kynwith castle, on the Taw, which they were besieging, sallied out with the desperation of cornered men, and inflicted upon their tormentors a defeat from which there were few who escaped alive to the long-ships at Appledore.

Thorkeld was the son of Swertha, of Stromness, a sister of Jarl Anwind, a landowner in her own right, and a woman of some importance in Orkney. He was five years old when his father sailed on his last piracy. All his youth he lived at Stromness, where a hundred long-ships, coming in from all the world, would lie up for the winter, and a hundred others, sailing south from Norway when the spring came, would call for change of news, or rendezvous, or recruiting, or for stores or water, before they sailed to take toll of the richer lands to southward. There he watched and listened and dreamed, and when he was twelve years old his half-brother, Halca, took him on a cruise that ended in the night-assault and plunder of a castle thirty miles up the Seine and ten miles inland. After that, he went on many such expeditions, plundering the rich Christian lands, as it was natural that the Northmen should, and on his

nineteenth birthday his mother gave him a long-ship for his own command, complete with crew and stores for a six-months' voyage.

It was a good ship, though not new, being the best she could afford to buy, for she was not rich, and the crew had not been overeasy to get together, and included too large a proportion of slaves and of untrained men, for it was a year when there was a great call for volunteers for a fleet which was to raid the Mediterranean coasts, and most men chose to sail under leaders of established fame, and where hopes of spoil were the highest.

Thorkeld was young and had the reputation of a dreamer only. "Wave-watcher" men called him then. The name was just enough. He had a dream which he had told to none, and he would say nothing as to where he meant to sail, until his ship was clear of the narrow strait, with Hoy Head and a southeast wind behind, and then he had put the helm round and sailed due north with the wind on his starboard quarter. For it was his thought to seek a land which he had dreamed to find beyond the ice-fields, where the summer sun would shine and never set.

He had trouble from the first day. Trouble with a wind that shifted to north-northeast, so that he could make little progress, or none, as though the skies themselves would warn him of the folly of the course he chose, while all his kinsmen were sailing southward to

take tribute from their natural enemies: trouble with the crew, whose sullen mutterings were to break out a week later into open mutiny.

He met the hostility of the wind with a stubborn seamanship, tacking and wearing if any progress could be made against it, and ordering out the oars when he found that he was being carried south by a force against which his single sail could make no headway.

He met the crew with the same obstinacy, arguing, threatening, promising; finally, killing the spokesman of the mutineers in a duel fought with axes within a roped space on the quarter-deck, the ship lying-to while it was fought, and it being agreed that the result should determine whether the course should be north or south when it should resume its progress.

Afterwards, it was a triumph of personality by which he had gained the support of a sufficient majority of the crew to his own belief and to somewhat of his own enthusiasm — and something they had found of what they sought. A wide and nightless plain of sun and flowers on which the snow was forgotten. But it had taken long to seek, and when they reached it they were aware, from the low large circle of the sun, of the near coming of the arctic night.

They gathered what food the land could offer for their empty hold and turned their prow toward a distant home.

Then light head-winds had hindered, and there had been hard labour at the oars in icy seas, while behind

them followed the pursuing shadow of the frozen dark — followed and gained. The ice-pack closed around them and the darkness fell.

It was three months later that Thorkeld the Wave-watcher had crawled out from an opened scuttle of a ship that was now no more than a snow-hump on a twilight plain of ice-hummocks to give battle to a bear that smelt and growled above the frozen hatches, and win food, if he might, for himself and the dying remnant of his crew.

The fight had ended with Thorkeld underneath and the bear above, but the knife in his left hand had pierced its throat, even while its teeth were in his right shoulder, and he guarded his face as best he might with a damaged arm.

There were eleven beside Thorkeld left alive when the ship came in sight of the green Iceland hills and cast anchor in Isa Fiord, and when Thorkeld went ashore men saw that his right arm was shrunken, and his right eye missing. The right side of his face was deeply scarred and discoloured and it moved curiously when he spoke or ate, and from that day he was called Bear Thorkeld, and the old name forgotten. . .

But that was long ago; and he had sailed on many seas and seen many a strange chance since then. It was not every man who would take his service, for he was not one who would push first when the spoils were divided or choose the richest lands for his raiding. But he gathered those round him of his own kind, and had

made a name of which men talked for a thousand miles in the northland, when the doors were barred and tales were told in the winter.

He was keener now on the taking of spoil than he had been in younger days, for, though he had never married, it was something more than jest when Guthrum said that he had many wives in Norway.

Marriage customs in the Scandinavian lands were different from those which prevailed in those within the pale of Christianity. There were many differences, not all to the advantage or the honour of either. There was one ancient custom of the north by which a woman, even of noble birth, and a landholder in her own right, might have children of different fathers without loss of reputation, or rather with added honour, according to the quality of those who acknowledged the fatherhood.

There were such women, of good repute, in Scandinavia, in Iceland, in Orkney, and in the wild north lands of Scotland, who had been glad that a viking of so great a name should have their friendship and the hospitality of their halls when he had laid his longships up for the winter, so that they might have the hope of a son to boast of so renowned a father, and who might prove worthy of the name he bore.

. . . Thorkeld had no private object in the plan which he had suggested as it rose in his own mind, and he could not therefore have stated it even had he been

one who would give an easy confidence to such men as Guthrum. He had, in fact, a plan of a different kind of audacity which he expected to occupy him for the next two or three years and from which it was likely enough that he would not return.

But he could not hold his mind back from the chess-board aspects of the life around him. He lived neither for wealth nor power, but for the event, the experience. He was still the Wave-watcher, though another name, born of another element of his nature, had overlaid it. War, which was a business to the men with whom he talked, was an art to him whether on land or sea — so that this last exploit of Ethelfleda, which to them had been a maddening irritation, a breach of the accepted rules by which they counted to enjoy their summer plunderings in the security of a winter peace, was to him an experiment fascinating in its audacity, and one which (he saw) had not failed through the unorthodoxy of its conception, but from causes which would have operated equally or more adversely to herself had she made her attack during the accepted season for military operations.

He turned to his companion, the young King of Northumbria, who had listened in silence to the wisdom of the older men. Sithric was of a muscular slimness, light of hair and skin, handsome in the northern style, pleasant and courteous of speech and manner, who had done his share during the day, as a guest should, in a

fight which did not directly concern him, and showed less sign of his exertions, in the arrogant ease of youth, than did his older companions.

Thorkeld said, "Here were strife to thy choice? If the Picts were quiet, you could bring ten thousand men in the spring, or perhaps more. You'd need a truce with Strathclyde. They might join for the Reged plain."

Guthrum's small eyes were watchful for the young king's answer.

"It sounds not ill," he said when he saw that they were all waiting for him to speak. Thorkeld guessed that he would have preferred to remain in silence and wished his question had been left unasked. But Sithric spoke now with an easy frankness:

"Of course, a lot depends on the Picts keeping quiet. We're not like you" — he addressed himself more personally to Guthrum as he continued — "we've got them on the north and Strathclyde on the west and Mercia down here, and you've got no one you need think of except these Saxons that you raid all summer. . . It may be we could do it after today, if we all join, but it is hard to weigh. Edward wouldn't let Mercia go down without aid, and we know what Wessex is. If you'd spent two years in Gloucester, as I did . . ." He left the sentence unfinished and added, "I should want Elfwin — and Mercia. That leaves enough; there's all Wessex — and Kent."

Guthrum nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "If we

won it all. . ." He fell silent. Here was a young man who knew his own mind and could state it clearly. He judged that he was of a straight-dealing kind, but one who would be tenacious for the right he claimed. This was well to be known, for Sithric was the one factor that he had to learn. No one knew him as yet. Up to six months ago he had been held in idleness, a Northumbrian hostage at Ethelfleda's court in Gloucester. When the last King of Northumbria had died, he had been nominated king in his absence by those who did not expect that he could gain his freedom, led by his kinsman, Hathgar, who had meant to rule in his name. And when he escaped — it was said with the aid of Elfwin, Ethelfleda's daughter, the heiress of Mercia — he had entered York by one of those strange coincidences of life which are so bafflingly frequent, on the day on which Hathgar had died in a private brawl, so that there had been none to meet him with treachery or a false and jealous friendship, and he had picked up the reins for which no other was reaching as they fell from a dead hand.

But, beyond that, he was a young man, handsome, cheerful, and courteous, but of an untested quality. He was like a sword well-polished in the armourer's booth, good to look at and to admire, but one for which a man would not lightly change a weapon, however dulled and chipped, which had stood the test of the battle.

Guthrum, thinking shrewdly, judged him to be of good temper, but not over-pliant: hard to bend, and

quick to spring back as the pressure slackened. Brittle ? It remained to prove. . . He could count something on his youth. He supposed that war, which was a business to himself or Biorn — serious and dangerous business to be undertaken only after cautious reckoning for a sufficient end — and which was an art to Thorkeld to be admired and studied, an end in itself — was a sport to Sithric — a sport which he would not lightly miss. . . But what was he doing here in the winter, wandering with Thorkeld among the League of the Five Towns ? Thorkeld went where he would. He was out-of-work in the winter. But Sithric's place was in York.

Well, it was a thing that only Sithric or Thorkeld could tell him, and neither of them (he judged) would be likely to do so unless he had a sufficient object. It might be best not to ask. Much may be learnt by those who watch and keep silent, and no one knows that they learn it.

So they thought and talked while the short day shadowed without, so that torches must be lit in the narrow-windowed chamber; and Guthrum, leaning back at ease from his stool against the wall behind him, must loosen his belt as he called for his drinking-horn to be filled again — and then all these far-thinking plans, and cunning doubtful thoughts were gone the way of their own foolishness — were gone forever as a cry of *Haro ! Haro !* rose in the street below, and a thrall burst into the little chamber, deference lost in

fear, to blurt out that the Saxons had come again — that they were swarming into the town.

Cursing, half incredulous, and half in fury, Biorn leapt to his feet with a lightness that defied tired muscles and a heavy meal. He ran out and down the stair not stopping to arm except that he had caught up his sheathed sword and was pulling it out as he ran.

Guthrum rose almost as lightly. He stood for a dozen seconds, his face blank of expression, his ears alert for the sounds without. Then he ran out also, taking no weapons at all, linking his belt as he did so.

Bear Thorkeld's face twitched into an attempted laugh as he watched him. "He's off," he said, and then, as Sithric looked his incredulity, "He sent his men back over the river an hour ago. You'll find he'll join them there and lead them back here if he sees that Biorn's winning, and if he thinks he isn't he'll clear out while he can. He won't risk East Anglia to save Biorn — or the Five Towns."

"Is he thus ?" Sithric answered. "Then is it learnt in good time. He makes no traffic with me."

Thorkeld's face twitched again as he said, "We may leave thought of that now. Don't you see ? We sat winning the next game while they were losing this. We won that we shall never play."

Sithric paused in doubt. "Yet must we now do that we can." He had armed himself as they talked, without haste or delay. He looked older, less slimly built

in his padded hauberk, coated with little overlapping plates of shining steel. Thorkeld's one eye surveyed him with approval. He looked one who would be followed by others. He picked up his swordbelt, saying again, "We must do that we can, but I would I had a few hundred of my own axemen at call — or your ships' pikes would be useful here."

"I'm glad they're not," Thorkeld answered bluntly. "I wouldn't lose my seamen in this brawl for the spoil of the Five Towns. . . As to help, it's a choice to take. It may be too late to get clear."

The viking led the way with no more words to a higher floor of the castle from which a narrow window gave them some view of the darkening street, for the castle of that time was built on a space within the town from which the houses had been cleared, but so that the narrow crooked streets crowded against its walls and made it less strong for defence than had they been demolished more ruthlessly.

At their first downward glance, it might have seemed that the issue was already decided, for there came a scatter of Danish soldiers running, dodging, and slipping into the cover of the narrow alleys, with a rush of Mercians behind them, battle-drunk and exultant, but the next minute, down from the higher street of which their window gave no view, Biorn himself came into sight, running at the head of his own guard, his sword out, his great voice bellowing above the hundred noises of the fight, and the two forces met in a combat in which they

swayed and struggled, too closely crowded for the free use of axe or sword, so that the cooler among them let the heavier weapons fall, and found their daggers were more effectual to gain the breathing-space that they needed.

Thorkeld turned away after a moment's glance at the *mêlée*.

"We should see if the gate be closed," he said, and they went down together.

They came on the steward, a maimed man, limping slowly from some mischance of hunt or battle, and very glad to see them.

He said that he had not thought that there was an armed man left in the castle, beside the ward-room guard.

Yes, he had seen that the gates were closed, and that men stood ready to open promptly to a friendly call.

He seemed intelligent, though pessimistic. Thorkeld asked him, "Could the castle stand, if the town fell ?"

He looked doubtful. Perhaps, for a few days. But for the moment there was no garrison; and if there were a garrison, there was no food. That would be the real trouble. There was food enough in the town, and over the river. But it had not been brought into the castle. There had been no thought of such an attack, and town and castle had been regarded as one for such purposes. Now there was not even a floating ox in the brine-tank.

There seemed nothing to be done but to keep the gates

open to friend, and closed to foe, and to wait the event.

The two men walked back to the room from which they came, and the viking put the case, as he saw it, to his companion.

"We can go out if we like, and try to get clear of the town before we see how the dice fall. If the Saxons catch us at that it looks worse than if we stay here, and while we're trying it we're about equally likely to get knocked on the head by either side.

"If we stay here and Biorn drives the Saxons out, we stand sure. If he get the worse, he should fall back here, and hold out if he may till he get help.

"If the castle fall, there'll be an end till the spring, but if it stand there'll be succour tried either from Leicester or Nottingham. Probably Guthrum'd join them for that, and we might be free in a week.

"For my part, I should stay having feud with none, and Ethelfleda is one that I would to meet. If she thought she'd hang me for a heathen Dane (which I'm not — but the difference mightn't seem important to her) I might tell her that which would change her mind.

"But you stand not as I. You may get that which you came to seek. But it may be by a dangered way, and if you would to come clear it is chance to be quickly tried."

"You must think how you stand as a hostage fled. She might hang you for that, and there is none that would call her wrong."

"I shan't move if you are of mind to stay," the young Dane answered. "I may get that for which I came, and by a short road. . . No, she would never that."

He spoke confidently of a lady from whom he had had much kindness and whose daughter he had learned to love — but he wished that he were quite sure.

That was ever the dole with those who had dealings with the house of Ethelwulf. They had their long prayers in their cold-stoned churches, and then — you could never be quite sure.

CHAPTER III

Four hours later, Sithric and Thorkeld sat again in the little room to share another meal with others than those who had eaten with them in the afternoon, but whether as prisoners, or hosts, or guests, it was not easy to tell.

Biorn was there also, but he lay now against the wall, his heavy difficult breathing loud in the silence of the room showing that he was not dead, and a hole in the side of his head into which one might have put a baby's fist showing that it could not be long before he would be so.

The Danes, knowing little of surgery but much of wounds, would have cut his throat at once, but that was not the Christian way, and now there was a Mercian guard at the gate (for when it was known that Biorn was down the castle had surrendered with little cere-

mony), and there was no one with both the will and authority to give that merciful order.

So the Jarl of Derby, breathing loudly, lay on his back in the bloody straw.

Anselm of Worcester, Ethelfleda's chaplain, lifting a thin, white, blue-veined hand, signed courteously to those who had risen as he entered to resume their seats, and took his own beside Egbert, an Etheling of Wroxeter who had been there already.

Anselm was very old. He had been a militant priest of the Church in younger days: had fought under King Burhred, before that monarch fled to Rome, wearied of a life of war, to make his peace with Heaven before he died. Anselm had two sons in Ethelfleda's army, for he was of the tradition of the Bernician priesthood, which did not forbid marriage, but excommunicated any priest who should divorce his wife. Now he was very frail and feeble, with a staff to support his steps, but his sunken eyes had lost nothing of the steel-blue keenness which had never quailed either for prince or prelate. They were eyes that could be cold and very merciless, eyes that had looked on many sad and some dreadful things, but which showed nothing of his thoughts as he gave one penetrating glance at the viking's distorted features and one of recognition to Sithric whom he already knew.

"Sirs," he said, "if you will swear a binding oath that they shall not be used in any hostile way, it is the will of the Lady of Mercia that you shall keep your swords."

"It is like herself," Thorkeld answered. "May we hope to meet her tonight ?"

"She comes later," Anselm answered. "Now she gives thanks to God in St. Olave's church. I would have been there also, but the scourge of years is upon me. She may be long and it is her will that we shall eat without waiting."

That was Ethelfleda's way, as it had been the way of all the house of Egbert and Ethelwulf for a hundred years. She was weary from a long and anxious day to which her strength was no longer equal; she had been many hours without food; she had given such hurried orders as were most urgent, leaving a score of dispositions for the settling of a later hour; and she knelt alone to pray in St. Olave's church.

It is told of her father Alfred, when he was young in war and his brother Ethelred was king, that they had gathered the men of Wessex for a great battle against the Danes, and that it had been agreed between them that Alfred should attack on one side and Ethelred on the other, and Alfred had led his men forward at the appointed time, and his brother had not moved, so that the whole force of the Danes had charged down upon his slender lines, and he had faced them as best he might while there had come no movement from his brother's camp, for the priest had been slow, and Ethelred would allow no curtailment of the mass which he had ordered to be celebrated in his tent before the battle.

After that, he had moved in no hesitant manner, and in the end they had scattered the Danish army, with the loss of most of their leaders.

Asser tells this tale — Asser who was Alfred's friend and who must have heard it from him and from others who were there and who had seen men die to hold the line which Ethelred had delayed to support, but he does not say that Alfred had resented his brother's failure.

"The things of God cannot be put aside for the things of men," Ethelred had told him, and there was no answer to make. . .

Now Ethelfleda, Alfred's daughter, knelt with hands and head on the low rail of the altar, glad of the support it gave, for she was physically ill with some internal evil before which her doctors were helpless —"a messenger from Satan to buffet her," so Anselm had called it — (had not her father suffered for nearly thirty years in the same way ?) — and gave thanks for the victory.

"Not unto me the glory, O Lord," she prayed, for she knew that heart and faith had faltered more than once as the day waned, "not unto me the glory. . ." She prayed long and passionately for the souls of the four thanes whom she had sent to their deaths — for the souls of all the men who had gone to death at her bidding. "Bring them into thy peace, O Lord." She even prayed that the guilt might be upon herself if they had died in sin, for she saw that but for her they would have been alive by their own hearths tonight. But it was worth it ! — would have been worth it, had it cost another

thousand lives. Her mind turned aside from prayer to a new planning. She would attempt nothing more in the winter, but she would not wait again for the Danes to move when the frost ended — she would have Leicester in the spring !

. . . Her mind wandered back to the audacity of a year ago from which had come the thought which had ended here tonight. It was that summer that the King of Gwent had come down from his home in the Black Mountains, and raided the Avon valley while her own hands had been more than full with the Danes who were in northern Mercia with a force which she could only harass, for it was too great for her to meet it in a pitched battle with the men that were with her then.

The King of Gwent had made alliance with the Danes so that they might both find Mercia the easier prey; and he had turned homeward, heavy with spoil, to find that she had mustered every man she could call out, and was holding the Severn fords, by which way he must go homeward, if at all.

He had cursed her when he saw it — cursed, and then laughed and turned back. He would winter with his friends in the Danelaw and go home in the spring when they could aid him to force a passage, if she were still there to dispute it.

And in the spring he had come again and found the fords unguarded, and marched home in triumph, still loaded with much of last year's booty. But when he came to Brecknock, at the far end of his mountain roads,

he had found his castle burnt and his queen gone. For Ethelfleda had led a force of chosen men through torrent and snow drift in the winter hills and had stormed a castle most of the garrison of which was with its king in the Danelaw. It cost him a heavy price to win back his wife and the other hostages she had taken — he would think twice before he came again to the Avon valley.

There had been little fighting then, for the manhood of Gwent were away, but it had taught her how the hardship of winter campaigning may be endured and lightened, and it was from that experience that the thought had come that she would try it against one of the Five Towns — a shorter and an easier road, though with a harder fight at the finish.

. . . And then there was that afternoon, three months ago, when she had sat on that same black pony that she had ridden today, and looked down from the heather-and-bilberry-covered ridge of the Lickey Hills upon the retiring army of the Danes, marching, close-ordered, home along the Roman Salt-way, with the plunder of half a county which they had swept up, even to the very walls of Worcester. . . With the resinous scent of pines from the hill-side woods, the wind had brought the sound of the creaking of the loaded corn-wains, the lowing of cattle, the bleating of hurried sheep, the grunt and scuffle of the carted swine.

Elgurth had been beside her then, urging, pleading for leave to attack with the six hundred men that lay

hidden in the Red Ditch and among the wooded swamps below Alvechurch. But she would not have it. She would not let herself be moved, even by the sight of the wrist-bound Saxon women, seized at the caprice of the Danes, and destined for the bearing of heathen babes who might perish unchristened.

She would not waste a Mercian life for an attack which was so likely to end in failure — and she had had the secret purpose even then, which she had not told even to Edward, whom she had met at Reading during the summer, and to whom she had given up the earldom that Ethelred had held, with Oxford, London, and the Berkshire wold, that he might be unhindered in his own campaign which had since developed in the Ouse valley so that he had recovered Bedford almost without a blow.

What would he think, when he heard that she had taken Derby and all it held ? It would mean much to him also. She knew Edward's mind, almost as her own. He would strike harder than ever now. It might even mean that he would strike for Northampton itself. . .

Were they destined — he and she — to drive the heathen plunderers finally from the English land ? Even to dream it was a joy almost intolerable. And then — if they could bring unity to the divided Saxon kingdoms and earldoms whose quarrels had first made it possible for the raiding Northmen to win a footing on the Anglian coast ? Athelstan and Elfwin — Edward's

son and her daughter — if they were wed, as they must be, Wessex and Mercia would be one, and the old feuds be forgotten. . . And the thought of Elfwin brought the memory of her wild fancy for the Danish prince — a heathen with whom no Christian would wed; an untaught barbarian who could not read a line in a Latin book; an enemy of all her race.

Mercia, in the hands of a Northumbrian Dane — Wessex itself might fall, and the age-long battle for Christianity and civilization would be lost at last — and lost for a girl's whim. It was a thought beyond tolerance.

. . . And she had heard an hour ago that Sithric was in her hands — in the captured castle. And he was a hostage whose life had been forfeit to her by the laws of war.

. . . She had once said to Edward that she could never condemn a hostage to death under any circumstance. It was a thing you couldn't make right by any arguing.

As an abstract question there could be only one answer, but as a practical issue it was insoluble like the question of slavery. It was cruel and wrong that Christian men and women should be sold on Bristol quay or in the market at Worcester (it might be right enough for heathens, Pict or Dane, or other aliens) — but what else was possible to be done with an outlawed man? You couldn't *force* people to take him back to their folk bond; and so, if he were not a slave, any man might

kill him that would, and there would be no fine to pay: he had no protection at all.

. . . She had said that she would put no hostage to the sword, and Edward had answered, "Well, who does? — But you'd better not say that you never will, or you'll find you'll have to, to save your friends." And being wise, she had considered this and seen its truth and kept her mouth closed on that subject in future.

For the custom was, when any treaty was made, or a bargain between nation or tribe, that they would give hostages to each other as pledges of good faith and fulfillment, and these hostages would be of the tribe's best, or the king's nearest — son, it might be, or sister — and their lives were forfeit by traditional law should there be breach of peace or bargain while the treaty held. It might be thought that there would be reluctance to be made a living stake in this way, and especially so as it was a rare treaty indeed which was not ignored or broken within three months of its signature. But, in fact, there were many more volunteers than were required for this purpose, for it was a way by which strange lands could be visited without expense, and with the assurance of good entertainment at the courts of their enemies. It was true that, when the terms of the treaties were broken, the hostages became liable to unpleasant consequences, but, in fact, the worst that was likely to happen was some severity of detention, for there were almost always hostages on the other side whose fate must be thought of. And besides, if things

go badly, a live hostage — and particularly one whose life is forfeit by the rules of war — is a pawn to play, while a dead one is of no use at all, and an awkward memory should the time come, as it may, when you will be asking for peace or mercy.

Of course there were exceptions. There have been accidents of travel at all times which do not prevent men from wandering.

Even a thousand years earlier, in the time of Cæsar, it may be read that he could have hostages very easily for the asking, and a chief who had handed over his children as the stake of faith would attack his camp in a fortnight as though the incident were forgotten.

But if it should be known that Ethelfleda had a conscientious objection to taking the life of a hostage on the trivial ground of his being the most obviously innocent of her enemies, she saw that it would not conduce to the safety of those that she might give to others, and there were Mercian hostages even overseas in Armorica and in Ireland.

. . . Yet it remained a fact that the life of Sithric was doubly forfeit. Forfeit by Bernicia's breach of faith and by his own flight — the escape which Elfwin had aided if she had not prompted. Should she put him to death there would be none to condemn her — and it might be a duty to her God and to the land she loved. Her thoughts came backward to prayer. *Nonne qui oderunt, te, Domine, oderam.* . . She must see these men and learn what had brought them here. Physical

fatigue was forgotten in the many things of the mind as she joined her waiting guard at the church porch and made her way to the castle.

CHAPTER IV

It was said of the Lady of Mercia that she kept more state at Tamworth or Gloucester and more distance from those she governed than had been the Saxon custom either of king or earlderman, but Ethelfleda in the camp was a woman of a different temper.

She sat with little ceremony to the meal which her attendants had prepared in the little room we have seen — the great banquet-hall would have been bare and cold for the fire had fallen, the thrall who should have tended it lying colder still in the mid-gutter of a Derby lane.

She greeted Sithric with a distant formality, from which he had little cause for satisfaction, and Bear Thorkeld with a warmer courtesy, looking at him with the interest which we feel towards those of whom we have heard much talk before, but she did not forget that he was an alien if not an active foe and that she had found him in the hold of her enemies.

She turned aside Anselm's anxiety as to her health and rest with a quick impatience. "I cannot rest as yet. There is still much to be ordered."

Seating herself, she looked at Sithric, still standing in deference, with a straight glance which was yet as that

of a stranger. "You need not stay now. I suppose you know your chamber as you know what you do here. There is an order that you do not pass the gate. We will talk in the morning."

She looked at Biorn, and there was less regard (if it might be) than she would have paid to a dying hog.

"Let him be," she said. "They can have him, if they ask tomorrow, to burn in their own way."

She turned to Thorkeld. She thought him uglier than report had told.

"I would know," she said, "if you drew sword against us today."

"In the earlier day," he said, "I gave aid as a guest should."

"And why not later ?"

"There was disorder and I was not asked — and I saw what the end must be — and it was a quarrel which was not mine."

"Yet you are of those who have made hell in England for a hundred years. You are a viking known. Is there reason why I should not hang you as my right is ?"

"I could show you reason," said Thorkeld. "But the hour is late."

"Could you show reason as good as mine ? The reason of a single raid from coast or river — rape and slaughter, plunder and fire ?" she answered, and her voice had the cold fierceness that such thoughts must bring.

"When ?" said Thorkeld.

As to that she was not sure. She was suddenly aware of a great weariness.

She said, "You are all one. But we will talk in the morning."

CHAPTER V

"Had I failed last night," Ethelfleda told him, as one who states a clear fact dispassionately, "you would have been of those who would have joined in next year's spoiling."

"It is like enough," said the viking. It may be a word too much to say that he would not have lied had his life been staked on his denial, but he thought himself in little peril, and it is a fact that he had lived for fifty years more or less — he took little care in the counting — and he had not found a need so great that a lie must meet it.

They stood alone on the castle wall, for he had said that he had that which he would show to her only, and Ethelfleda, who feared no man, had led the way to this high solitude.

"It is like enough," he said, recalling the plan which he had proposed last evening, and which seemed so foolish today, "but I have no such purpose now, if I ever thought it. I have different plans which should bring peace rather than warfare."

"Peace !" she said bitterly. "What peace has been in

a hundred years since Northmen landed at Weymouth ? * Our cattle taken, our churches burnt, our women raped, our children tossed on your pikes ! Do you wonder if our hearts are empty of mercy ?"

Thorkeld answered coolly, "It is the world's way with the weak, and it is for those that made it to answer. But it is foolish to burn good wood, be it roof or keel. As for the women, they should be content for the stronger to take them. . . It is not every Northman who will toss a babe on the sword-point. There are those of us who count it an evil deed, and you know the name that they call us. But it is a thing that will chance at times when men are drunk with plunder and song, and with wine and the sword-play. . . You have a rich land and you have more food than you have mouths to eat it. Our fields are small and our crops are scanty. Our women bear strong sons and they will take their need. I think that you are faced by a tide that you will not turn. . . There is another thing that may break you. Since Harfager ruled it, Norway is all one land; and Gorm is making Denmark alike; but you are at open feud, Saxon and Briton, earldom and earldom, shire and shire, which scarcely stills when we raid you. Should we leave you quiet, would there be peace in England for half a year ? There would be only peace in the Danelaw. . . What we need is an empty land which I once

* In the summer of 791 there came word to the king's reeve at Dorchester that three strange ships approached the port, and thinking no evil he rode with a few companions to the shore to welcome them in the king's name, and to receive their port-dues, "and by them," says the old chronicle, "he and those who were with him were slain."

thought to find in the Arctic seas, but the winter is a night too long and its cold too dreadful. Yet we may seek further, to better end, and it is that which is in my mind to try."

He went on to tell of settlements on the Greenland coast, of vague tales of a further land, of the crews he had gathered of a courage like his own, of ships he had bought or built which he thought fit for the perils of distant seas.

They stood fur-cloaked on the battlements, for the day was cold though windless, and he drew parchment charts from an oilskin case that he had brought and spread them on the stone parapet against which they leaned. They were rough charts, scrawled and erased and queried, and they ended blankly before the Atlantic wastes that no man had yet ventured to sail — or, if so, he had not returned, and there was none to tell it. Listening, she forgot that it was a barbarian with whom she spoke, one of her hated and heathen foes, while she weighed the venture with that combination of imaginative genius and cool judgment that belonged to the family from which she came.

"Have you ships that would live ?" she asked doubtfully.

The long-ship of that time, in which the viking sailed from his native fiords for the raiding of Europe, was not built for a long voyage, nor for rough weather, nor yet for warfare.

It was built narrow, for speed; and shallow and flat-

bottomed for the ascent of rivers. It liked to follow the coast, and to lie up if the wind were threatening. When the spring came, and the sea was quiet and the wind favourable, it would venture the crossing of the northern sea, depending on its oars for a quick voyage should the wind cease or veer. Mostly they were boats of sixteen oars a side, of a length of eighty feet or a hundred, a breadth of fifteen or twenty, and a depth of about six. They had little space for cargo, and the crews would not endure the discomfort of sleeping in them if they could land on the beach and spread a sail for their shelter.

Thorkeld had built three ships of a greater depth and of two feet extra width and thought them fit for any storm which would be likely on a summer sea, and with these he was of a mind to explore beyond the Greenland coast if there were any land to the westward.

"Queen, if you should hold me here," he remarked reasonably — he did not suggest any more acute unpleasantness — "my men will be enlisted by others, and they may be used against you, which it is not my purpose to do."

"I have heard," she answered, "and Anselm has recalled it to me this morning, that you have not been of our frequent foes. It is said that you withdrew from the great Thames fleet of ten years back — that which was trapped at last in the Lea."

"I would not join it, being afraid," Thorkeld an-

swered simply. "I liked not its leaders nor the plans they made. Nor are our long-ships equal to the fighting ships of your father's building."

She changed the subject sharply. "What doth Sithric here ?"

"He is my friend," Thorkeld answered, and said no more. She might take it as explaining Sithric's coming or his own silence, as she would.

"He is no friend to me or to mine," she said, and turned her eyes onto the viking with that rare intimacy of approach which could bring all men, or almost all, to her bidding.

"You call him friend. You see far. You look around and ahead. If he leaves York, where there are ever those who will plot, and comes hereward when Yule is near, I know well why — as you know it. You will be his friend if you show him that what he seeks is vain.

"I will speak plainly, for it is a time when such words are best. You have said that we Saxons strive among ourselves, and that it is through that that you slay us. Do you think us so blind — we who have the burden of rule — that we do not see it ? . . . You call me queen, but you know well that I am not. I am the Lady of Mercia. Edward is my overlord. That may be little to Edward and it is nothing to me. We have been as one from our births. I am Wessex born and the child of a Wessex king, but Mercia is my mother's

land. I say it is nothing to me. But there was a time when Mercia ruled from sea to sea; and the Mercians do not forget."

She paused for a moment, her mind overloaded with contending memories, and the viking answered.

"What are words ? It is your deeds that are known to the world's ends. You are the freedom of Mercia."

"I am not for Mercia," she answered, "nor is Edward for Wessex. We are for England always. Mercia is a thin wedge of freedom driven northward amidst our foes. It is the edge of the Wessex axe. When Ethelred died I had not a friend on all my borders except Wessex in the south. There were Danes in East Anglia; Danes in the Five Towns; Danes in Northumbria; Picts and Britons in Strathclyde; Irish Danes at the Dee-mouth; Britons in North Wales, and in Gwent . . . Edward said, 'Give me back the dukedom which our father gave at your marriage. Give me Oxford and London. Give me the right to move with freedom on the Berkshire downs and to make what order I will, and I will so harry East Anglia that they will have little leisure to vex you.' That I gave, and what he said he did. Was it not well for all ? Bedford is his, and I am in Derby today. Yet my own murmured against me. Not only the Ethelings — the old nobles — but my own thanes muttered and scowled. There was talk of calling a folk-moot. A folk-moot when I needed every man to hold the line of the Watling Street that could be spared from the harvest ! A folk-

moot when there were Danes on the Bridgnorth hill ! And it might have been, had I not sworn aloud at Tamworth in the hall of my judgment, yes, by the Death of God, that I would hang the next man that spake, though he were the best I had."

She paused again, but he did not think that she had finished or that she expected an answer. The point was yet to come.

For a moment the pain and weakness of the evil which was destroying her body overcame her mind.

She said, "I would sit," and they moved to a wooden bench under the battlements.

Then she spoke again in a quieter voice. "It was when my father came back from his last war that I learnt what my life must be. He had taken London. He had driven the Danes back into the Danelaw, and even there they were to yield to his bidding. He said, 'I have a hard thing to say, and we must talk alone,' and he took me into his own room, where he would let no man enter . . . We had had a happy childhood at Winchester. There was always war in the distance, but it did not reach us; and we had many books which my father sought ever to save and gather. All those years I had not seen a man killed ! . . . It was not till Edward was fifteen that my father let him go out with the armies that he might be skilled in the ways of war.

". . . All those years Mercia had been in slavery to the Danes, since King Burhred fled to Rome. Now

they had withdrawn as the price of peace in the south, and the King, my father, was overlord once again.

"He said to me, 'There is one, Ethelred, of the royal Mercian house, your mother's cousin and yours, to whom I have given the earldom of Mercia. It is my will that you wed this man so that the old feud may be ended. I am near to death,' (he looked well as he said it, and the words had little meaning: I understand now), 'and Edward will be king here, and I will make it that you are equal to Ethelred in your own right, and you and Edward will be as one when you face our foes; and I think, at the last, that you will free the land.'

"I said, 'I cannot wed a man that I have not seen. I am happy here. How could I help Edward? I am a girl, young and foolish, knowing nothing of statecraft or of war. Is it not enough that I order your household since my mother died? If you do not want me here I will go to my aunt at Shaftesbury, and Ethelgiva can take my place.'

"My father thought long, and he said, 'You shall go to your aunt, if you will, even though you should take the veil. I would not hold you from God. Yet I think that this is God's will, and, in the end, you will do it.'

"So I went to Ethelwerna, who was the abbess of Shaftesbury, and I stayed there for a time; and we talked long, and in the end I went back, for she had shown me that it was the right way.

"I was wedded to Ethelred, of whom I have no evil to say, and my daughter Elfwin was born. My father died and Edward was king in Wessex. Then I said to him, 'Send me Athelstan, your eldest, and he shall grow with Elfwin, and in due time they will wed and the two lands will be one and the old feud forgotten.'

"Edward said, 'That cannot be, for you will have sons, and they will claim the earldom, as is right.' But I said, 'I will have no sons. I will have no more children at all; for that is the way of peace.' And Edward said, 'Then it is good,' and he sent the boy, for his new queen was glad that the child should not be in her sight, and they grew together."

Thorkeld said bluntly, "You must have thought you were God."

"God?" she said wonderingly. For the word sounded strangely from viking lips.

"I mean neither Odin nor Christ," he answered. "You must have thought that you could change the purpose of the Fates from which all things are."

"There is none higher than God," she said. "You speak the folly of dreams. I think that I did right, for I took ever the harder way. And I sent letters by one who travelled to the Saxon School, and he brought back dispensation, even from the Bishop at Rome."

And she fell silent again, having many memories of the old days and some doubt as to how much more could be wisely said as she approached the point to

which all this had been leading, so that it was Thorkeld who brought it to speech, saying:

"And now it goeth not well? There is another who will not wed as she is ordered to do, and there is no aunt to guide her?"

"It went well," she said. "It went well till this Sithric came." She remembered things which she would not speak, which it was not for such as Thorkeld to know, and she altered her word, having no will to lie. "It went not ill till he came."

"Queen," he said, "what is all this to me?"

"You call him friend. You are older than he and you see more. I show the rock on which he will surely die if there be no pilot's hand on the helm."

"I see no cause of death," Thorkeld said, "though much folly. . . I will be no pilot in unsounded seas. You must give me chartage. Is thy daughter as one of the line of Ethelwulf? . . . I mean no evil . . . But there is always talk."

"There is one thing that no talk will change. She is the heiress of Mercia. She is of the royal house and she is last and only. She cannot wed with a Dane."

Thorkeld saw that there were things that Ethelfleda would not discuss, though she would not deny them.

There were strange things said of the heiress of Mercia; and, though Sithric might talk in a different way, his words often confirmed them.

It was said that she showed no likeness to the line of Ethelwulf nor to her father, the Mercian earl — that

she was not Saxon, nor even British, but was as black and small as a Pict. It was said that when she was two years old, a woman had been ducked three times because she had said that she was a changeling child. It being December, the water had been cold, and the woman died. People observing her end whispered the more, but there was no open speech.

. . . For three generations the house of Ethelwulf had been the sole rock which had withstood the Danish conquest of England. The tide had beaten upon it on every side: at times it had overwhelmed it so that it had seemed to be lost in the storm: but it was a rock that it could not drown. Its sons had been of one mould, and its daughters also. Wise in counsel, skilful and stubborn in war, faithful to their God and church, lovers of freedom and order, each waging a life-long fight for Christianity and civilization in their corner of England, against a barbarism which had been advancing for two hundred years like a shadow of night across the face of Europe, they had made Wessex the one rock on which the edge of the Danish axes broke.

Once, in the days of Alfred, when Dane and Northman had combined with all their strength to destroy this stubborn core of the England which they had almost won, it had seemed that the last night had fallen. For three winter months Alfred had lain in his last retreat amid the swamps of Athelney. But with the spring there had been a steady gathering of Wessex

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men behind the screen of the Selwood thickets, a swift and secret march, a daylong fight among the woods of Etheldune, a following of the routed Danes, a close siege of their camp, and their surrender to famine. But that was forty years ago, and it was only last night, though she could not know it, that the high tide had turned as Ethelfleda led the way across the frozen meadows. . . There were hard battles yet to fight, long years of strife to be endured beyond Edward's life or hers, but, if Wessex and Mercia could be one, if the dream and purpose of her life could prevail, the end was sure. And of the young Athelstan there was no doubt. He showed already all the qualities for which his fathers had been honoured and loved and feared. And for the plan which would have wedded him to Elfwin next Easter, it had gone — till Sithric came — not ill.

The two children had been brought up together, so far as Elfwin could be brought up with any, and though they quarrelled and differed, they had known their intended fates without any evident protest.

. . . In those days the bond between mother and child had been very close — even closer, it might seem, because they were so far apart in all else that they loved or valued.

For Elfwin had been a strange child from her birth. A lover of deep woods and of waters which men fought and feared, rather than of the warm hearth and the coultered fields. A silent child, content with the soli-

tude of her own dreams, but one who said things, when she talked, at which men wondered. She would look at life with her own eyes and not with those of parent or priest as a child should. She would not learn even to read, pleading aching of head or eyes and escaping at the first chance to the solitudes of the woods she loved. And in that she had her father's support for he had little learning himself, though he could sign his name and could read some words in his own tongue, and in those days she was small and thin and very pale, though of a restless activity. He said, "You will be little pleasured when the child is dead, though she may have learnt to read in three tongues," and the word gained her some freedom, for her mother had been afraid.

. . . She wondered vainly how she had borne such a child, though she fancied that it was partly explained by the hardships of that year, when food had been very scarce, for the harvest had failed, and it was after the summer when the Danes had crossed Mercia with all their host, to winter at last within the deserted walls of Chester, and they had taken much cattle. She had not been one to eat while others lacked. And when the spring came and the birth of her child was near, Ethelred had taken her to a safe place deep in the heart of the Arden woods, for there was no town, nor any village that summer, where a woman could be in peace, without fear that she would be called to a sudden flight when she might be the least able to face

it. Indeed, in those days, there were few Mercian women so bold or careless that they would bear a child beneath the roof of its father unless within the protection of the stockaded mounds of the greater towns. Every village and settlement had its secret corral, in swamp or forest, to which children and cattle could be hurried if alarm were given, and to these places would the women go when the time of child-birth neared. That is, for such as gave birth in the summer days; but, for the most part, they would plan these things for the winter when roads were mired and fords were flooded and there was peace in the land.

. . . It was when Elfwin was ten years old that there had been the question of the Maisemore wood.

Now all men know that there is a natural enmity and a constant warfare between themselves and the forest.

It is true that there are pannage woods of beech and oak which are for the feeding of swine, but, apart from that, a tree is of no use to any till it be felled, nor can you grow corn even then on the cleared land till you have grubbed up the roots with much labour of men, and straining of the pulling ox-teams.

Acre by acre, as the children grow and there are more hands for the axe-hafts, men win their way along the river valleys, and widen their settlements, right and left, till there are broad fertile farms from which the forest has been driven back; but the fight is hard, and the forest watches ever, like a beast crouching to spring,

and, if there be too much war or a pestilence shall prevail, it will win back that which it lost, and men of a later time will stumble over fallen walls that docks and nettles have hidden.

So when men are not fighting among themselves, they take axe to the trees that the spade may follow. It is the warfare that has never ceased since the first men were: which may not cease till the earth's purpose is ended.

Maisemore wood was on the narrow land between the west bank of the Severn and the Leadon river which flows into it under the walls of Gloucester.

It was a very old wood of the ancient English trees, oak and yew and holly, thorn and ash, and in places there were elms and some birches. But it held none of the newer trees; beech and lime and plane moving up from the south had not forced footing in that close growth, nor had there been invasion of the northern pines, by which men knew that it was a very ancient wood. Older than the coming of men to the land. It had foxgloved hollows and was floored with hyacinths, and there were thickets of briar-rose, and of woodbine among the haws.

That year there was a pause of peace after the harvest, and Ethelred gathered men for the felling of the wood which was but five miles from Gloucester town but on the further side of the Severn, where men were loth to dwell, being in more jeopardy both from Dane and Briton. His woodward marked the

trees by number in the order of felling so that they should fall clear, one after one, but when the axemen came to the first they could not strike for there was a child that cried, with thin white arms round the tree, that it should not be hurt. They feared to use violence for she was the Earl's daughter: they offered gifts, but she would not take them.

At the last they went and told the Earl, and he laughed and said, "If the child wants the wood, let it stand." But Ethelfleda had been at hand and she had said, "You are foolish ever. Let me deal in this."

And the Earl answered, "You may deal if you will. But the wood stands."

She said, "So it shall end if you will. But let me deal."

And she sent for Elfwin, who came gladly enough, for at that time they loved well.

She said, "Here I am, mother. Here is your Little Sin." (For so she called herself, which is another tale which must wait.)

And Ethelfleda said, "What is this I hear of the wood?" And, being patient, she told the child of her folly and showed that men are more than trees and that such things must be.

But the child said, "I think it would be a fairer world if there were more trees and fewer men. They do not move to do evil. They need neither spade nor prayer."

And Ethelfleda said, "You can save the wood if you

will, and it shall be yours of your father's gift. What will you barter for that ?"

And Elfwin said, "I will give much. I will learn Latin words and I will be in my own bed at night, even in the summer nights when the woods are best, and my tongue shall stay in its place." (For when Athelstan, being a wiser child, would tell her follies, she would put out her tongue at him behind his back, a pink flicker, thin and quick like a snake's, which her mother blamed.)

So this treaty was made, and if its terms were not kept, the gift was to be taken back and the wood felled.

By this, Ethelfleda gained much, where Ethelred would have given without terms, for Ethelfleda was one who ever strove for her own will, yet she saw not then that Elfwin had her will also, though she thought it later.

But the years passed, and that she always slept in her bed when her mother was away in her many wars, or her buildings of burgh and wall, is a thing which is hard to say, for when but a year ago, Ethelfleda had been planning for the taking of the castle of the King of Gwent, she had said, "I would that I had a sure guide of Saxon birth, for if we hire them of the hills they may betray us for the bond of blood, and the chapmen know not the way overland, they go up from the coast."

And Elfwin had looked as one who would speak and paused, for her mother and she had not spoken to

one another for many weeks, and at last she said, "It is not hard to find. I can show the way if you will."

And Ethelfleda answered, "How can you know more than others ?"

Elfwin laughed and said, "I go far in dreams."

Her mother answered, "Can you never speak true words ? For this is a great thing."

Elfwin said, "Dream or truth, how should I know now ? There have been summers since. But I can guide you through Gwent if you will. It is a country of hills and of quick streams, and the trees are many, but the men are evil and few."

Ethelfleda said, "If you would leave your dreams and tell me how you know this ! — if you know it indeed, for it is a great matter."

Elfwin sat at the board as they spoke, picking the bone of a rabbit's leg with teeth which were small but very sharp, and a dog stood on either side of her stool, watching that he might catch the bone with a swift snap, should she cast it on his side, before it fell in the litter.

Elfwin was nineteen then, a woman no longer awkward or pale or thin, but with a slim body that was soft and firm and tireless. She wore a tunic of apple-green, with a waist-belt embroidered in silver thread, and between her breasts which were round and firm, but too small for those of a Saxon woman, there hung an enamelled cross, with a holy relic blessed by St. Cuthbert himself, which her mother gave her at her

confirmation three years ago, but, above that, her tunic was closed at the throat with a silver brooch of an outlandish pattern, scrolled with some heathen rune, which Sithric had given and concerning which she and her mother had quarrelled some months before.

Elfwin answered nothing till she had finished the bone and had cast it to the jaws of the dog on her left hand whose turn it was; then she wiped the dagger, sharp and small, which could be used either as a weapon or at the meal, and put it back in the sheath at her belt as she said,

"We both dream, mother, you and I; and they are dreams that we cannot leave. Only, the dreams in your mind become deeds. You dream today that you have fired the castle at Brecon, and tomorrow you will be there and the smoke will rise to the winter sky. Today's dream and tomorrow's deed, they are one to you; but with me it is the deed of yesterday that is the dream today. That is why I do nought of the things I dream — " And at that her voice had sunk and her eyes had changed as a man sees death, for the thought came that it was of Sithric that she dreamed, that she would have him in spite of all, and her words were her own doom. Yet that was but a moment, and she went on in another tone, pausing between her words to lick a soiled finger delicately with that small pink tongue which she had used in childhood to a worse end.

"Yet, be it from deed or dream, I can show you the

way you need, which is not from here" (they were in Gloucester at this time), "for there is dense forest, hard to pass, where there are men that dig sea-coal from beneath the trees, and there are valleys of Wye and Usk which are ill to traverse in winter, and could be held by few; but from Hereford is a better way. . . I will guide there, and Offa, who is thy best at such warfare, can capture the castle; but I would, mother, that you should not go, for these are days when you tire and it will be a hard way in the frozen hills."

Ethelfleda knew then that she spoke truth and said, "You shall be our guide, and we will go by Hereford of which I had thought already; but I must go myself, for which I have strength enough." For she feared lest her men might return, saying that the way was flooded or that there were drifts of snow or that they had been lost in the hills or that the castle was too strongly held or that their food had failed, if she were not there to see that it came to a good end; and she would also to forbid evil when the castle was stormed.

So Elfwin had ridden with her and had guided them as though she were in her own land, but how she came to know so much she would never say.

. . . All this was in Ethelfleda's thought and much more that there is no space to write and of which she had no will to talk.

And Thorkeld answered, "Had you failed last night, it might have been no ill thing that your daughter should be loved of a Danish king."

But she spoke again at that, with the passion which had died from her later words.

"It had been no ill thing ? It had been worse than now ! For now it is but a vain dream which my hands will break; but then had it been an overreaching fear. Can oil and water blend ? Can — ." She checked herself, as though feeling that to such a hearer there could be no use in such words. She ended, "I will see Sithric, and he shall swear by every oath he owns that he will seek her no more or I will hang him as my right is. You are his friend if you tell him that what I say I shall very surely do."

"As to that," Thorkeld answered, "he should know you better than I. But I will tell him that there is no woman for whom a man may pay with his life but he has bought her too dear. It is a thing that you and I know well, being old, but it is hard for the young to learn."

Then he went, with no further words, for he judged that what he thought would be vain to say.

CHAPTER VI

Ethelfleda said, "I will take it of you though it be but a Danish oath, for I think that if you swear it you will not lie."

"Lady," Sithric answered, "it is for that reason it

will not be sworn for it is an oath that I could not keep."

"Is life nought? I have no will for your death, yet your life is forfeit to me; and by your own folly and by the mercy of God you are in my hands, and I will not spare you unless you swear, for it is a thing that I dare not do."

"Lady," Sithric answered again, and she was aware of a thought of anger that he should so address her, which had not been his use — he who was himself a king, a Danish king of a conquered part of her own land — but it was her true title, and she would not let a thought of pride deflect her mind.

"Lady," he said, "she is of your own blood, though in some ways she may be unlike her race, but she is alike in this, that the thing that she mislikes she will not do. She and I would wed, but it should be for peace not evil. I want not Mercia, having my own land to rule. Let Athelstan have it. But him she would not have had, had we not met."

"You are self-deceived," she answered. "Him she would have had; and him she will have still. You know not those of whom you speak. That which we mislike we most often do . . . But you know well that you cannot wed. You are not of her faith nor of her kind. What life were hers in the land where your kinsmen have befouled and slaughtered? It was known through the whole world, a land of learning

and peace. Is there a book left unburned ? A monk's house unfallen ? A church in all the land that yet stands ?"

"There is the great church at York."

"Truly," she said with an added bitterness in her tone, "there is the great church at York ! And why is that ? Is it not that it could not be fired lest the whole town burn ?"

"Yet it stands," he answered. "Be that as it may." He kept steadily to his point with a strength of will and a self-control that she could almost fear. "I will offer this. I will wed her in your church at York, by the rites of your own church, and her faith will be free in the land."

"It is vain to talk," Ethelfleda answered with the gesture of her hand with which she was wont to end that which she would no longer hear. "You are not of her faith, and there is no priest that would wed you. It is against the order of God."

"That is nought," said the Dane. "For on the day that I take her I will take her faith also if that must be. It is a faith that is well enough and it is a smaller thing for there be many gods, but of Elfwin there is but one."

"You blaspheme," she answered, "not knowing the faith. There is no God but one, and without true faith it is a church which you may not join."

"If I bring Northumbria to your faith, is it a small thing ?" he persisted. "Is there a priest in your

church that will not welcome me gladly, being that which I am ?"

She did not answer that, for she knew too well that there had been such admissions to the church, and she had heard them defended.

She said, "We waste words over that which shall never be. If you would live you shall swear. You shall give me answer tomorrow, for I go back to Tamworth, and I will end this thing before I go. I have talked too long."

She went with no further words.

CHAPTER VII

There came one who rode a mud-splashed horse through the rain along the valley road.

She rode as one who sits at ease, but by her horse's signs she had ridden both fast and far.

The gate-guard had orders to be more heedful of those who entered the town than of those who rode forth, for reasons easy to see, but they did not stay her, though they looked in wonder.

Their pikes went to the salute. They stared after her up the narrow street.

She rode on through the town asking way of none for she saw where the castle rose, and she was one who would ever find her own path.

As she rode through the market-square she saw Cyn-

frid, chattering at a booth. She drew rein, and called him to her.

"Cynfrid," she said, "do I come in time? Is all well?"

He knew her meaning well enough, but he was less sure how to frame his reply.

He was loyal to her and to her mother, with a dog's loyalty and a dog's wisdom, and there were things which he would not see.

"Lady," he said, "there is nothing which has gone ill."

"So I thought it would be . . . Where is the Queen now?"

She would always call her mother queen, because it fretted Athelstan, and he could not openly resent it without rudeness, being still in his aunt's charge. She would tease him also, calling him "overlord" which she was resolved that he should never be. To Mercia, perhaps, but not to her. So she told him; threatening, in another mood, that she would lead Mercia to the walls of Winchester when the time of her rule came. She had no will to do it, but she liked well to vex him and to hear him talk of duty to faith and land, and . . . How she hated Wessex and him!

Cynfrid answered, "The Queen rode forth on the western road three hours ago. She rides after Hermild who left the camp, thinking all was lost, before we had taken the town."

"Does she ride with force?"

"She made up six troops, picking the best from all." He added, "Hermild hath not forty, and they are footmen and ill armed."

Elfwin nodded. It was like her mother to leave nothing to chance. To go herself, and to take such a force as would make resistance vain. Six troops was nearly two hundred men.

But she had her own matters in mind. She asked, "What start had he ?"

He had had a clear day, even without counting his evening march. It would be tonight, at the best, before Ethelfleda would reach him. She must return at an easier pace. There were two clear days and perhaps three.

She said, "It is very well." She blessed Hermild of Chester in her heart, though he deserved to hang, as he would.

She sang somewhat as she rode on, now with a thought for her horse, letting him walk if he would, and looking round at the strange streets with lively eyes and shaking the rain from her cloak for the skies were clearing.

Half-an-hour later she sat at a needed meal with Anselm, who rose late, and with Thorkeld, to whom all times were alike.

They were in the little room of which we know, and she sat at the head of the board as her right was. The bishop sat on her right and the viking on the

other hand. There was none other there but those who served.

She greeted Anselm whom she knew (and could have feared, but that it was not easy for her to have fear of men), but her eyes were for Thorkeld of whom she had heard tales that will ever grow in the telling. She did not mind his twisted face nor his one eye. She was of those who see souls.

She asked, "You have wandered far ?"

He said, "Lady, I have gone where I would. Now there is neither near nor far. It is all home to me. Yet I would go farther before I die."

"You have found life," she answered, but he knew that she had another thing in her mind and it was to that she would come.

He looked at her critically. She was finely formed, but too slight for his own liking. Yet she might breed good babes. She had ridden far and she showed no weariness. That was well. She came of a great house —at least on her mother's side. He thought less of Ethelred. An easy man, so it was told, whom his wife ruled . . . But she was unlike to either. Yet it was foolish to call her Pict. She was black enough, but she had nothing of their ill-shaped leanness, their queer ears, or their furtive ways. To think of a Pict was to think of something that twisted under your horse's feet or your own, or of a knife upthrust in the belly. She was not Pict nor British.

Yet he thought Sithric a fool. He could admire the small dark head with its glossy half-curling hair, but her eyes were hard to read, and a woman should be easy to read and to handle. He judged her neither. Had he come on her on Bristol slave-quay, he would have thought her worth a good price, even to that of an old boat. But not more. And it might not have been easy to sell her in a good market . . .

She turned to Anselm as the one to whom such a question could be most fitly asked.

"I heard tale that Sithric is here ?"

"It is true," said the bishop, "but it should be nothing to you."

"It is much to me," she answered, "as I think you know." (Had she not confessed to him last Easter ? Did he think her one that would change ?) "He must be safely from here before my mother returns."

"That cannot be," said the bishop. "Your mother hath made other disposal."

"My father," — and Thorkeld thought that he heard the hardness which was sometimes in her mother's voice when it spoke of her country's wrongs — "there are few things that cannot be."

"Yet this is one," the bishop answered, unmoved. "For he is guarded by those who would not heed you, having received orders too strict to break. You will do no good if you meddle. It will only be to your shame, and you have shame enough."

Elfwin opened wide eyes at that as at an unlooked-for folly.

"Father, you speak an ill word. I have no shame at all."

"Verily, I think you have none," said Anselm.

"Then there is one thing on which we do not differ." She turned to Thorkeld. She knew that she could always silence Anselm with flippant words which it was beneath his dignity to counter in their own coin even had he a wit that could have held its own at such fencing. She asked, "Will you tell me what hath been ?"

But Anselm spoke again. He had thought of another aspect of the matter on which defence would be difficult.

"Rode you here alone ?"

It was rarely that Elfwin laughed, though she would smile often to herself as one pleased with her dreams. But her eyes were alight with merriment as she answered,

"I could say no and yes to that and they were both true. I said to Athelstan, 'I ride to Derby in haste: give me a guard.' He said, 'You cannot do that: your mother would be wroth.' I said, 'That is nothing to you. That is between her and me only.' He said, 'She has made me governor here. I cannot let you go.' — For my mother had made him governor both of the castle and of the town during her absence here.

She hath ever some pretext to keep him safe from the fighting. — I said, 'I am not Tamworth. You are not governor of me. I cannot stay to talk, being in haste. Give me a guard.' He said, 'That I will not do.' I said, 'Shall I ride guardless in a land which no Saxon might enter but two days since ? What will you tell my mother, if I be lost ?'

"He was wild at that, for he knew not what to say or to do. He said at last, 'If I give you a guard it is to partner folly, for without a guard you cannot go.' I said, 'I will go guardless. Have you known me to lie ?' He said, 'You shall not go. I will give orders against it.' I said, 'Will you that ? And is there one here that will heed them ? You may be prince in Wessex, but I am heiress of Mercia.' He was wild in wrath, but he would not try that fall, being in doubt. He said again, 'You know that you cannot ride to Derby alone and you shall have no guard from me, so you cannot go.'

"When I was gone, he was afraid and he sent a guard of ten men, who came up with me five miles beyond the town, or it may be six, with their horses blown, for I had ridden fast and they were heavy men. There was a time when I said, 'I ride as hard as I may on a winter road. Go back now, lest your horses die.' So they went, unwillingly; and I rode here, being hindered of none."

Her lips still smiled as she added as to herself, "He well knew why I came."

Thorkeld spoke at last. He answered shortly, giving the point at once as his way was.

"Sithric is here under guard. The Queen has said that his life is forfeit in law, but he may go free if he will swear that he will come south no more. Otherwise he was to hang today."

"He hath not sworn that ?" Her voice was confident as though she would assert rather than ask, but it had a tone of anxiety as of one who would have assurance given.

"He saith that he will not swear," Thorkeld answered.

"So I knew. But if the Queen is absent how gave she him till today to make answer ?"

Anselm interposed. "Your mother knew not that she would go till it was late yesterday. Sithric's matter waits her return."

That was how it had been. She had not heard of Hermild's absence till late that night, and she had given orders at once that six troops should be ready to pursue him with the first light of the winter dawn.

It may seem strange both that she should not have learnt it till then and that she should think that such pursuit were needed, but the explanations are simple.

Chester stood by itself. The Dee valley is wide and flat. The grass is good for the fattening of cattle. There is a high rock six miles from the river-mouth, and on this Chester had been built. It had stood, it might be, for a millennium. It guarded all the plain,

both from the Welsh hills, and the sea. But there came a time when it was sacked and spoiled, and after that it stood empty for nearly three hundred years. And for all that time there were few or none that lived in the valley for it is useless to fatten cattle that we cannot keep. Men who travelled by the Roman road that ran from North Wales to the Danelaw might look up at its deserted walls and talk of the great days when there had been cities everywhere, and England had been a secure and ordered land. But the Dee valley was an empty waste when Ethelfleda had come down it ten years ago, resolved to reclaim it to her own rule.

There was the rock and the protection of the marsh and the river curve, and there was still the circling mound and the wide moat and the ruins of the city wall, but inside there was nothing but the fallen houses and the weed-grown streets.

Ethelfleda rebuilt the walls. She built a new fort at the bridge-head. She put in a Mercian garrison, and the town began to rise again. She resettled the valley. She found that it had become a place of casual resort of the Gaidhil — the Irish Danes, who came for the fishing, or as a point from which they could cross England by the shortest way to reach their friends in the Danelaw. She made peace with these Danes, of whom some had accepted the Christian faith, and in a later year she admitted as colonists some Norwegians who had invaded Wales, and, being defeated there;

had fled into the Mercian land. With these mixed elements she repeopled the empty land, but there had been fighting among them and rebellion already which had not been easy to quell. She had levied men from every shire she ruled for the winter raid on the Danelaw, but those that had come under Hermild from the Dee valley had been late and few and ill equipped and of an obvious reluctance. When he had judged that her cause was lost and had reloaded his baggage-carts two days ago, he had done little to aid the fight and he had been well content to believe it. If he should carry such a tale to Chester and it should spread thence to North Wales and to Ireland, there might be raised a fire, before the truth should be known, which it would cost much to stamp out.

Yet no man had told her that he had gone till the evening of the next day, for there had been much to order. There was great spoil to divide and many claims to consider: there had been garrison to provide for the captured town in a half-hostile land from an army that was impatient of every hour that held it together. For that was always the trouble with the Saxon armies. When the fight was over, every man wanted to take his share of the spoil and go. Besides, they could not stay long in the winter fields: they must be billeted in the town and in the Danish camp over the river. Prisoners were few in these wars. It was flight or slaughter for most; but there were eight hundred unwounded men on this occasion surrendered

during the fight or brought out from the houses in which they hid, who would make good slaves either to sell to the merchants for the sea-trade or to till the Mercian fields.

There was prompt inquisition also to be made among the inhabitants of a town that had been in Danish hands for so many years. Some to be restored to property or offices they had lost, some to have provisional leave to remain, some to be expelled, some to be sent to the slave-gang. And the four thanes who were the professional leaders of this civilian levy had all been killed and many of the best of their helpers. Was it strange that a day had passed before Hermild's flight was reported to Ethelfleda, when each who might have spoken would conclude (if he thought at all) that she knew it ?

Elfwin, having learnt what she would, talked of Sithric no more. She judged Thorkeld his friend, which Anselm was surely not. She would talk with Thorkeld alone.

She asked only who was in charge in the Queen's absence, where so many were dead. Anselm told her that Egbert, the Etheling of Wroxeter, was in charge of the castle, and Hunno of the town.

Dull men both, Elfwin thought them. Her mother must have been short of choice indeed when she gave command to such as they. Yet they were not men that she could hope to wheedle, though she might outwit them.

Anselm did not say that his natural authority and that of his office led him to consider himself the actual representative of the absent Queen, and that he had already given such orders, on that assumption, as he thought well, and had found none to dispute them.

CHAPTER VIII

Elfwin went out when the meal was over to see what accommodation the castle gave for her own apartment and to observe what she could. It had little comfort for women, and she said that, for that night at least, she would sleep in the Queen's room, and there must be better order tomorrow.

She came back to find Thorkeld alone, and resolved to learn how far he would be likely to aid her.

"How move you here, are you free ?" she asked.

And Thorkeld answered, "I am free to go if I will. The Queen is kind. But I stay at her wish; for she thinks that I may persuade Sithric to such course as will save his life, which she is loth to take."

"Think you to do it ?"

"I know not. Life is dear to all. To lose it for a woman is a plain folly for it is to lose her with the rest, and if you are a king you lose much."

"There is no life will be lost. Can you see Sithric ? Can I ?"

"There was an order that I could see him, which I

did. I know not if it still holds. Nor how it would be with you."

"Is he below ?"

"No. He is in a chamber on this floor to the east."

"Will you try if he can be seen and tell him that I am here ?"

Thorkeld agreed to this. He went out and returned at once.

"The two guards have the keys, and their orders are to admit none till the Queen returns."

"As to that, we will see," said Elfwin. "Will you show the way ?"

They went together.

He did not lead to the chamber in which Sithric was held, but to the end of the corridor which led both to that room and to the one from which they came, for it was here that there was a guard-room and a heavy door. For this part of the castle was not for the confinement of prisoners but for the use of the castle's lords and their guests, and the locked and guarded door was so placed that it gave protection to those who dwelt there against internal treachery or secret entrance to the castle, which were risks which a noble of that time must always take into reckoning.

Here were two of Ethelfleda's most trusted men, relieved by others every eight hours, who held the great door and the keys of Sithric's chamber. There was therefore no one actually on guard at the room itself, but what difference was there in that ? He was stoutly

locked in, and should he escape from the room itself, his gain was small, for there was no way out except by the guarded way, and even if that were passed, he would still be in the castle.

The two men sat on a bench at the side of the open door which would be locked and barred in the night-time, so that this wing of the castle could not be entered by any, till they had parleyed with the guards through a grated hole in the panel.

The men rose as Elfwin approached. They were well armed with pike and sword and dagger.

They saluted, as they had done when she passed through before, when she had given them no thought at all.

Now she stopped and said, "I would speak with King Sithric. Have you the keys here?"

One of the men answered. He was short and somewhat stout. He looked worried and breathed heavily between his words.

"Lady — it is the Queen's charge — that none shall enter."

The other man was silent. He had an obstinate, rather sullen face. He would not lift his eyes from the ground.

Elfwin did not argue. She said, "That is well," as though she were content, and returned. Thorkeld was puzzled. He had not thought her to be a woman of action from the tales that were in the mouths of men. From what he had seen in the last hours he

was inclined to a different judgment, but he saw her now give way very quickly, and the first thought returned.

When they were back in the room she said, "It were vain to have said more. They had talked of it between themselves since you had questioned them. We must look higher than they."

In the next hour she saw Egbert, with whom she might have prevailed had not Anselm been first to warn him. She saw Anselm also but gained nothing beyond the satisfaction of feeling that she had vexed the intellectual arrogance of the old priest with words that he could not seize.

She met Thorkeld from these rebuffs, showing an undisturbed serenity at which the viking was more puzzled than before. He thought now that Sithric's danger was much greater from Elfwin's coming, for he thought her powerless to help, while it might well be that her presence (should it come to Sithric's knowledge) would stiffen his resistance to the taking of the oath which the Queen required, and might make her more resolute to enforce her will.

He had thought before that Sithric was at a pass where he had no choice but to yield and that he would surely do so rather than lose his life for so vain an obstinacy, but he turned now to the contrivance of some escape before the Queen should return.

As to that, he was not hopeless, though he could see but one way. The guards must be slain and the keys

seized. He was vexed by a point of honour as to how far he could go in such direction, having kept his sword on the condition that it should not be used in any active enmity. Was this a literal pledge, or did it bind him against hostile violence of any kind? With his friend's life in the balance, he could only answer it in one way, but he was not sure that Ethelfleda would accept that interpretation, and he saw that, should he give active aid, his own life might tremble in the same scale.

That thought made him cautious. For he had no mind to end his days in this by-chance peril.

He pondered whether to take Elfwin into his confidence or to keep his plans to himself. He disliked to be allied with women when steel was bare, or in any swift or subtle or secret thing. He did not feel assured that she was one whose wit was of a fighting kind. She seemed to take repulse as an expected thing.

On the other hand, there were ways in which she might help, both in the castle and afterwards should they win free. Also, he was Sithric's friend, and the Dane might not thank him if she were left behind. He might even refuse to move without her, should he learn that she was in the castle. Lovers are often fools. At the least, he felt sure that she would not betray them. On the balance, she must be told.

"I am minded," he said, "to get him forth tonight, even though we break in the door."

"It would not be a quiet way," she answered. "Can we think of no better ?"

"I meant it not, unless better plans should fail. Yet even if we get clear of the castle gates there is more to do. Are there any here you could trust ? Could you procure that there shall be three horses outside the walls ?"

"Three ?" she said. "You have a servant here ?"

"I have more than one, as hath Sithric, but we know not where they have been lodged. That is for thought, also. But I meant not them. It is for Sithric and you and me."

"Me ?" she said, opening large eyes as she had done to Anselm when he spoke of shame, "I go not to York. We are not wed."

Thorkeld looked at her in a new wonder and some contempt. Here was the lover who had come for her at his life's risk, and she thought less of him than of a priest's prayer.

Yet a woman's no may change, and he had his friend's battle to fight.

He said, "There is nothing in that to hinder. You can be wedded in York."

"That is wrong," she answered. "He is not of my faith."

He turned this aside almost in the words that Sithric had used on the day before.

"That is little. There are so many gods. If he wor-

ship you (as he does), he will worship your gods also. He will marry you where you will."

"Yet I come not to York," she answered. "I know not enough of your Danish ways — and I know too much. There may be many gods, but they have given me but one womb which I guard well. There are things which I will not do."

She spoke without heat, not as one who argues or who resents, but as one who explains only. Thorkeld might think her fool if he would, or he might pity Sithric who risked so much for so poor a gain, but he judged it useless to urge. Yet he added, "If you stay here, having aided us to go, you must face the Queen's wrath."

"That," she said, "is the more cause to stay."

"Shall I tell Sithric this," he asked in a final effort, "if he win free? That we have met, and that she for whom he came and hath risked all will not go with him when the chance is hers?"

"You may waste words as you will," she answered, "for he would know it untold. Yet I will tell it myself when we shall meet, for which the time should be near."

There was surprise in Thorkeld's one eye as he replied, "How should you see him soon? Did you not say that there is none that will grant leave?"

"Said I so? . . . Yet I learnt when the guards change and his meal is served."

"Doth that help ? Will you not ask in vain of the new guard ?"

"But I think not to ask. I go in."

CHAPTER IX

Bishop Anselm went to the Etheling again after his encounter with Elfwin. Unlike Thorkeld, having known her longer, he did not underrate either her capacity or pertinacity in the pursuit of that which she might desire. In all this he knew that she was of her mother's race. Her difference was that her desires were not controlled by the values of those about her, whose guidance she should have sought, and the code of conduct which she observed was of an equal freedom, as is common with those who care little to read or to listen to those who teach, but rather to walk apart and to eat and sleep when they will.

He remembered that Sithric had escaped once before, when at Gloucester, and that none had known how he did it, though it was supposed that it was at Elfwin's contriving; and the cryptic answer she had given when he had asked her directly what had been.

"Father, few are held, but it be of their own will. There is ever a new way."

Was she planning a new way now ? Then it was his part to ensure that it should fail. He gave up the rest which his age required, to warn Égbert again, and

when he learnt that she had questioned as to the times at which the guards were changed and the hours at which food was carried to Sithric's room, he went himself to give such orders as must (he thought) prevent this knowledge being of avail for any purpose which he could think her to have.

The guards were changed at the sixth hour and those who came on duty brought the evening meal from the buttery as they came up. The others went off when they appeared, after transferring their keys, and one of the new men would then go on with tray and platters to Sithric's room while the other held guard at the door.

That seemed well enough to deal with one who was pledged not to use his sword and was not expected to make any wild attempt at flight such as would bring him under the observation of a score of the garrison before he could hope even to come to the outer gate which would be barred and guarded.

It seemed well enough; but Anselm ordered that the two new men should take in the meal together and that the two whom they were to relieve should not go off duty till they had returned and reported that the prisoner had been secured for the night.

It followed that Elfwin, seated at ease, still talking to Thorkeld, but of his own life, which she was keen to know, heard the feet not of one but of two as they passed the door with the meal which they carried along the passage.

If she were puzzled by this it did not seem a sufficient reason to change the purpose which she had formed.

She rose without haste and went out into the passage. She was not seen of those guards to whom she had spoken before, who were at the door at the passage-end, for the passage turned, rectangular with the castle wall, and she saw those whom she would follow entering Sithric's room. They did not see her, but, had they done so, what of it? She might walk where she would.

Sithric, sitting in evil mood, not having been told that Ethelfleda had ridden forth, and having waited all day for a moment which did not come, looked up as the men entered. He had heard the steps of two where he had expected one. Did it mean evil? Had she decided to have his life without further parley and so make her end sure? He felt a cold doubt and yet the relief which comes when the time of waiting ends and the battle joins.

He saw the two guards, of whom he knew one by sight, and with whom he had had some speech already. That one had unlocked the door and came in holding the keys. The one who was strange bore the tray.

Sithric felt the reaction of anti-climax.

He said, "I have no will to eat. Bring you no word?"

The man who held the keys answered, taking the

question to himself, because Sithric's eyes were on him and because they had spoken before.

"Lord," he said, "the Queen hath ridden forth. All things wait her return."

After the moment's pause of these words, he turned, as it seemed to close the door. For he had in mind the caution that Anselm had given that they should guard Sithric well, that he should not leave, nor that any should enter to him.

But Elfwin came in as he turned.

He knew her well, being a Gloucester man, of her mother's household there, and the thought to oppose her with any force did not come to his mind.

Yet he said, "Lady, we have orders that none should enter here."

She answered, "But such orders are not for me. I go where I will. From whom came they? Not from the Queen?"

No, the man admitted. They were from the Ethel-ing; and Bishop Anselm.

"I thought that," she answered. "Should they question aught, you will say that the Lady Elfwin does not answer to them. She walks where she will."

The man looked irresolute and unhappy. He knew that when there are differences among those above, those fare best who walk wide. His companion, having laid out the dishes, stood as one unconcerned, being well content to leave him to take the brunt of the trouble.

"Lady," he said, "you will hold us clear ?"

"Clear ?" she said. "Nay, faith, I promise nought. Of this I do hold no speech with any. You will say what you will."

"Lady," he said, "we would go. We cannot leave you here."

"You will wait," she answered, "outside. The dishes must be borne back when they are cleared. I must have speech with the King."

The two men looked at each other, but neither was of a courage to contest the issue. They went out, drawing the door close.

CHAPTER X

The room into which Elfwin came was a fair guest-chamber into which a king and queen might have been shown without shame, having a bed of good size, stool and table and lamp, and a stout chest for storage of clothes.

It had also a hanging of tapestry on its longer wall, of a great age, and of a value which only the chapmen knew. It showed a woman bare under a great swan which held her with beak and feet and with the beating of great wings. Meaning it must have had when it was wrought, but it was a dead tale. For though the Latin tongue still lived so that kings could speak to one another from land to land in the Christian pale, yet such books as were left in England at that day

were English records and missals and the lives of saints. And these the Northmen burnt at every chance that they had, being, as it were, the symbols of that which they smote to end.

But the old heathen books of false gods and of foolish tales, that were written before Christ came, a thousand years ago, or it might be more, and that were hard to read, and dull of matter when read, it was not they that would be snatched up by the flying monk while the bell tolled and there was the noise of the striving of men from the river quay.

. . . But Elfwin did not look at the room. She looked at Sithric, as he at her.

He had risen in a glad wonder when she came in and had learnt much from her words to Gurth.

He had new hope, but his mind was empty of thought in the joy of the seeing and to know that she had come to seek him.

They stood some two yards apart. I know I tell that which will be hard of belief, for by the tales (if not the truth) of our own day, they should have kissed long: they should have cooed, *"Dark stars of night"* . . . *"O Sithric mine,"* forgetting time till Gurth knocked, or the bishop came.

It was a time of plain words and of rough ways, of strong lusts and of cruel swords, but the hearts of men do not change with the years, and love is a shy thing, when the first barriers are not down, which are the hardest to pass.

Here were lovers who had found each other from York and Tamworth through a land at war. They were here at peril to both, and we may doubt if there were one in all the land (even Thorkeld) who was true friend to both, or would think favour of that they would.

Love brought them here through all, and being but two yards away, they stood each where they were, and, for a hundred heartbeats, there was neither reach of hand nor a greeting word.

Would we understand, we must look back to that which had been.

When Sithric, king's nephew of Northumbria, being sent as hostage from the north, had been first lodged in the palace at Gloucester, (the new hall at Tamworth, to which Ethelfleda would move her court, was not furnished till the next spring, for it had not been put in hand till Ethelred died. — He was for Gloucester and Worcester ever, but Ethelfleda loved Tamworth best and to be near her foes.) — there he had been companioned of Athelstan, who was a prince also and of a like age, and they had gone together, though they differed in much.

Sithric had learned less of books: he had been reared in a wilder land. He followed his mood: he seemed to live for the day.

Even in sport Athelstan would live by rule: he was one who had missed his youth. He was younger in later years as will sometimes be, and (as we know) he

was to be a great king, fortunate and valiant and wise; but now he would ever pause to glance at the sun's height and would go in to his books, saying, "I have had my hour."

He was slighter and weaker than Sithric, and less skilled in the use of arms. He had the poor health of his race. Yet he would train his body for the ways of war with a patient care as a man breaks a colt. A score of times Sithric would pass his guard when they would practise with blunted swords, and he would say without heat, "I will try that again if you will. I shall do better yet."

Sithric liked him well. That he liked Sithric is less sure. But he was one who was frugal of his words, and what he thought was not always known. Only Elfwin could tease him to an open wrath, as she often would.

Elfwin would go with them at times if they went afield in the safer days, it might be to hunt or fish or to see the land, but she would come at her own whim, joining them when they thought not of her or leaving them to return alone. She kept ever to herself as a cat keeps. She was of those who will be touched by few.

Then there came a time when she and Sithric would meet, as it were by chance, and would go alone. This was not often seen, but it may have been more than was known of others. It is a fact, which none knew, that at this time she taught him to swim in the Severn stream (for that was one thing that he could not do,

and she could swim, as she had taught herself, in a lithe sure way, as an otter slips through the weeds), but after this there came a time when she would keep apart, and would not see him, though she well knew when his eyes were on her as they often were, and this Ethelfleda watched at the board, and her thoughts were troubled.

Edward came to Gloucester, and she told what she saw and asked his counsel.

He said, "I would see nought. Let Sithric go back. She will the sooner forget if there have been nothing said."

She answered, "There was news but yesterday. They break faith in the north. They have raided on Reged plain."

Edward said, "Have they so ? That is ill. You may put him in ward and send threats, but I think it vain for his uncle would have his death."

"I was about to tell more," Ethelfleda answered. "There is rumour that his uncle dies and that of right he should be king in York."

"Then is his case worse," said the King. "If he set out for York he will be dead in a week, they being there what they are. Send him to me at Dorchester, in a sure guard, and he may yet be a pawn to play."

"It is well thought," said the Lady of Mercia. She gave orders at once. Sithric found himself under lock in a high tower, and was told that he must be ready to travel to Dorchester on the next day.

There was no secret in this. Elfwin heard. It was two hours before that she had talked with Sithric who had word of his uncle's death. He was keen to be at York, and to claim his right. When they spoke of his going, there had been that which was known to both, though it had not come to the birth of words. They had planned that they would meet again in the later day, in a quiet place, but that could not be for by that time he was held.

Yet it was but a few hours later, in the darkness of night, that he was free and riding north at a pace which would take him far ere the day came and he must hide in the great woods till the light was past.

For Sithric, waking from an angry dream, heard his name called through the window-bars, by a voice he knew. It was very urgent, though not loud, and he rose in haste as Elfwin said,

"Here are keys to take. They are all you need if you go out by the postern way. There is a ready horse in the stalls and the dogs know you. Take them quickly. I cannot wait, and they should not fall to the floor."

He came quickly, marvelling, and would have held her in speech, but she was outside in the darkness like a fly on the castle wall, her hands holding to his window-bars and her bare toes to a narrow coping of stone four feet below.

She said, "I must get back, lest I tire. I would not die in the moat." For the palace moat was eighty feet

beneath, and she knew that she could not live if she fell.

Yet for a moment she stayed. It was "Sithric, you will come again ?" and "I will come when I am king in York. I would come through hell." It was "I will write letters at every chance. There is a merchant at York who is sure. I will write in the Danish tongue, very clearly, that you can read." — For Sithric could write no Latin, and Saxon he could not speak well, save with thought and pause. — It was "Sithric, will you give me no pledge ?" and a brooch passed through the bars. It was "Sithric, take not that, it was my father's gift which I must wear ever." But he laughed and drew the ring from the finger that held the bars. It was a ring of her father's house — a woman's ring which he had given before he died, charging her that it should not be ever sold or go from her.

Sithric said, "I will give it back at a good time." She was well content.

She said, "I must get back, lest I tire."

He looked out on a night of stars and down to a great depth. He could not see that on which she stood. He had a dread of such depths against which he would ever strive, but he could not win. He could not see how she would get back to her own room.

She said, "It will be easier than to come. I have not the keys."

But it was not easier. She saw that it would be at peril of life that the last two yards would be passed.

She was not afraid. She had no fear of any height, having lived much in the trees when she was young. But she had no will for a risk. She came back to the window. Sithric was still there, listening in fear lest she fall.

She said, "I cannot go that way. I must to the roof. Can you put forth a hand that will bear my weight? I am less light than I look . . . It must be higher than that. You must stand on the stool."

Then there was her body against the bars, and then her weight on his hand for an instant's space, and she had caught the battlement overhead, where it was cut through for the bowmen, and clambered up and called down to him a low and laughing word, which was to dwell in his mind till they should meet, and he should be in a like peril again.

. . . It had been the next morrow that Elfwin sat at breakfast with her mother, and Athelstan, and with her uncle, the Wessex king. There were no others at the first meal of the day for that was Ethelfleda's habit as it had been that of her father.

It was known that Sithric was gone, and a good horse. None had seen him go, and his door was locked as before.

Edward of Wessex was not a man who would draw eyes in a crowd. He was somewhat small and spare, a grave-featured man, grizzled of hair, and of a beard that was neatly trimmed. He had eyes that were quick and cool.

Men said of him that he was a better soldier than his father (which is to say much), but not equal in scholarship (which may leave space for praise, for few were).

All his days he sought peace and endured war. In later times men would call him Edward the Elder, but at his death they gave him the title of the Never-conquered King.

He looked at his niece who seemed as one who has slept well and who ate with good appetite.

She met him with friendly eyes which did not fall, though she feared him.

He said, "Know you aught of this?"

"Uncle," she answered, "I know much. I could have said that Sithric was not one to wear gyves in thy dungeons at Dorchester. But you ask late."

Edward looked at his sister who was silent, as one who did not hear.

Now these two had held together from childhood, and their lives were of one purpose. It was here only that Edward could speak in full freedom and peace, for there were jealousies of women in Winchester that vexed him much. There had not been purpose or plan which he had not shared with Ethelfleda for thirty years, nor she with him.

Yet she was silent now, knowing how Sithric had escaped, for Elfwin had told her. On his part, Edward remembered "she is her mother," and said less than he thought. He looked at Elfwin. He was used

to the judging of those around him, either women or men.

He saw that she was different from her mother, yet he saw likeness also, which most men missed. He thought "If I take not order against it, she is that on which this land will be wrecked." He turned the talk into other ways.

He spoke of a treaty which was proposed with the King of Gwent in regard to the netting of Severn salmon, of a plague of grubs in the Kent woods, of some Andalusian horses which he had bought and praised.

Elfwin said, "I would you had brought them here. But they are not suited to our land till it be more roaded and drained. There are none for us like those from the British hills. Mother would storm Brecon again for the black pony which she took from the Queen of Gwent."

Edward saw that she was at ease, and yet he thought that she feared him. What would be the end of England were she queen at York with a Danish son ? He swore silently by St. Cuthbert (which was a great oath with him, and appropriate to such a risk), that it should never be.

After the meal, he had spoken to Athelstan apart.

Athelstan knew the will of their parents and was willing to wed his cousin, though without warmth. It was the need of the land, which seemed reason sufficient to him as to them.

But he told his father plainly that it would not be.

"She hath her own will which is strong as thine. She will marry the Dane."

Edward was not of that mind. "The Dane hath gone now. He will marry none. He will be dead in three months. I give him six at the most. I know his kinsmen at York."

He changed to asking of a tale that had been brought to him at Winchester. A tale of Athelstan and of a byre-maid and of Mortmaise wood. A foul tale. Athelstan said coolly that it was false; it had been true of another who had been mistaken for him as he left the wood in the dusk. The King nodded assent. He had not believed the tale; and Ethelfleda had told him that it was false already. So it was. Yet it was a tale that would cling to the name of Athelstan all his life, and after.

Men would say in later years, over the ale, "Yes, he is a good king. But he was other in his youth. He must have greatly changed. It is said that once . . ." and the old tale would be whispered again, in the low voice which should be used when we speak of kings, and they would go home and tell their wives when the hour was late and their daughters slept (as they thought) in the bed that was against the further wall . . .

We have wandered somewhat from a straight tale? Well, there was cause, and we can come back when we will.

. . . Elfwin spoke first. She said, "Why came you here ?"

Sithric said, "I came to see you. I have stilled York."

"Did you that in truth ?" she said, not as one who doubts, but as one who would hear it again. She was not thinking of York.

They were closer now. Elfwin felt the strength of his arm.

She said, "Nay — nay — there are men without. This is no time . . ." They kissed once and came apart. She felt hot, and her heart beat as she would not have it. She did not know whether she were angered or pleased. She had been touched of few.

He said, "Am I free ?"

She put that aside as a small thing. She said, "You will be free ere my mother comes. Thorkeld thought I would ride back with you to York."

"Will you that ?" he said, with a sudden light of hope in his eyes.

"You know well that I will not. You must back with speed. You must not lose York or we lose all.

"Listen and heed well for I have thought of all, and there is no time for the word which is twice said. You will take our faith for it is the only way. It is the better faith, so in this you will gain much. Ask not here but at Rome. You will make peace with my mother and with my uncle, on the best terms you may.

Guthrum breaks. If you make peace with speed, you stand sure . . .

". . . As to me, you will ask nought. I will be no cause of war, which would be its issue, or none . . . Besides, there is a better way . . . Athelstan wants not me, and him I will never wed. He wants the land. That he can have. There will come a time when they will see that I am better gone — but it is not yet. . . But nay, I say wrong" (as he would have held her again) "I am better gone, and the time now . . . Nay, you spoil all if I go not now . . . You shall be soon free."

She went without knowing whether Gurth carried back the untasted dishes, or went without that excuse for his delay, or waited longer while they were cleared, as to which we may each guess what we will.

CHAPTER XI

Elfwin went back to Thorkeld. She told him what had been (or as much as she thought well), and he concluded that his first estimate of her might have been more nearly right than his second.

He commenced to plan for Sithric's release with some mental energy, and on lines which would have been approved by a novelist of our own day. I do not say they are wrong. Human nature is a strange thing which does not simplify to those of us who observe it as long as the brevity of life will allow. A mur-

derer, seeking escape, will walk onto a ship where he is quite sure to be caught. He looks round for a trap that he may enter. The leaders of a world war decided that it is always better to hammer at the front door than to get in at the back, and as they were all of one mind on this point, they demonstrated its truth to the admiration of their historians.

It cost a needless million of lives, but against that we must remember that it became a war of attrition. It coined a phrase.

They quoted maxims of Napoleon (who understood the importance of ignoring the maxims of his predecessors) in ways which must have made him squirm in his grave. They would have done better to read Mahan.

But to state that which is known is a poor reason for wandering from the straight path of a tale which I try to tell.

Thorkeld has been talking, and Elfwin has listened. She admired Thorkeld. He had the glamour of Ulysses or of Othello to a dreaming girl. But, if we may judge by her looks, she was by now of a mood which became less and less of the Desdemona order as he displayed his plans.

There was a key to steal. That would open Sithric's door. That would be her part. There were the guards at the passage-end to be killed in the night. Beyond that, they were to trust to her right to go out with her servants when she would. Sithric and he

were to be dressed in the clothes of the murdered guards and were to pass out as her own attendants. What more would you have ? Thorkeld was well content. Elfwin might do her part, but it needs a man to think these things out properly.

Elfwin yawned. The fact is that she had risen early, and had done much. She wanted to go to bed.

She was not confident that she could steal a bunch of keys (or even one) from two men who were set to hold them. She was unpractised. When it came to the killing of the guards, she observed a fallacy in the plan of the previous theft (unless Sithric's presence were essential to the second act of the drama), but she stated the more serious obstacle.

"I would have no part in that. They are men I know. Their wives wait. It is another thing that I will not do."

Thorkeld sulked. Would she give him a better plan ?

She said, "Could we think a worse ? All gates are barred in the night. Men are marked who move. . . Besides, there is no haste. There would be time in another night for that which is all folly and risk and blood." She added, with a wish of courtesy somewhat lately thought, "Or so it seemeth to me. It may be other to you. I am Christian born."

Thorkeld took the apology with an ill-content. He was not a man of blood, in spite of his profession and

parentage. He took the world as it came and he liked the ventures of strange seas. As to the killing of guards, it is no great matter. Every novelist knows that. They are not as other men. It is what they are for.

He said, "Then what is it to be?" An hour ago he had not valued her help very highly. He had pondered moving alone. He did not think of that now. Her contempt for his plan (which was barely veiled) was not an encouragement. He felt disposed to leave it to her.

She said, "There is no wisdom to stay here. It is not where I should be. If we are marked they will think we plot. I will to my own room. We will meet here again at the matin hour. . . I am tired now. It is ever so when I argue with Athelstan, that I am tired all day. He will not cease when he hath said all."

She went out, yawning.

CHAPTER XII

In the morning they met again, in the same room, and at the hour she had said.

Now she did not yawn. She said, "He must go today. We must let him loose."

She went to the window. It was somewhat high, but very narrow. It had two upright iron bars set in the stone.

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She looked out and said, "There is nothing to hold us here. . . Could you take out these bars without noise and so that nought fall in the street?"

Thorkeld came to her side. He remembered how she had miscalled his own plan, and he would seek faults in hers.

He said, "That might be done, but I see no gain. A man might squeeze through and a rope be cast, but he would be seen of many. Even at night, he would be overseen from the wall, or captured by the watch below. I think mine was the better plan. Men who leave of good right do not go by a rope, but by the gate, as my plan was. It is a chance in the night, but it is no sure way."

"I had no thought of the night. There is a way, but I may need gold of which I have but one piece."

"I have that."

"I can repay you by a sure merchant at York."

Thorkeld laughed. "I lend never: and there is no lending in this. It is not to be done for thee."

He drew forth a chain of fine gold, wrought in small links. With his dagger's point he loosed off twenty of these, one by one, so that they could be spent as she would.

He said, "There is ever more to thy need. Vikings do not lack gold. Sithric hath it also."

He spoke no more than truth for there was a double chain in a belt of silk around his waist, which he let none see.

She smiled at the pile of gold, filling the palm of a small hand.

She said, "I could buy much with this. I could buy the town."

It was a time when coin was rare. Most things were paid in kind. And she was one who took little count of gold, nor could bargain its worth.

She said, "I shall need time for this. I am not one who loves haste. At the first hour after noon I will be here. It is no harm if I fail."

She went out, leaving Thorkeld with his eye on the window-bars.

In the castle she made order in her mother's name. She would know all who were there — of the household, not of the garrison, who were Egbert's charge. She took the household to her own rule, and none could question her right. She judged of whom she could trust, and how far.

She gave orders to some.

She went down into the town, riding openly, as one who would see a new place. She came on Cynfrid again.

She spoke long and she passed him gold. She left him a troubled man, but she went in peace, knowing that he would do her will.

Later he came up to the castle and she saw him again.

At the first hour after noon she came to Thorkeld as she had said.

"Can you take out the bars ?" she asked. "I have arranged all else. There is none will disturb you here. I have allotted rooms. I have given tasks. I have said that I will be troubled further of none. It is a time for rest. Here is a key which should meet our need. It is well oiled."

Thorkeld answered, "I can take out the bars, though I see not how it will help. We have no rope."

Elfwin did not explain. She said, "If you would do it with care ? . . . There should nothing fall in the street."

He said, "How got you the key ?"

"That was nought. All the keys are twain, lest there be loss or theft. It was fetched by one I can trust, whom I placed in charge of the warden's room . . . I will see Sithric now."

She went out with the key in her hand.

She was back almost at once, saying that Sithric dressed for the road and would follow.

The bars were loosened with little toil. It is likely that the dungeon vaults and the lower windows were better held, but this work had been ill done. There was one in the town who would have hanged had Biorn seen the extraction of those bars. But Biorn was dead, and the sub-contractor in question was not likely to repeat the mistake should he be called to do work for his new rulers. Ethelfleda was a great builder of mound and tower, having seen how greatly they may

lengthen the lives of men and protect their gear, and she would watch with her own eyes, or with others that she could trust as herself, that the work should be firm and true.

Sithric came in, cloaked and armed, and with a wallet packed. He had in mind his two thralls who had been parted from him with baggage that he was loth to lose. Thorkeld rowed in the same boat, but he was an older man and had observed that a good cloak may be lost and a better got, but if life be lost it is not replaced.

Elfwin said it was good chance enough that they could be sent in safety, which she would make her care, and that it was unlikely that any would be concerned to inquire or hinder. To ask of these servants now would be a peril too great to take.

That was agreed, but here they stood, not knowing how next to move. They looked to Elfwin, and she looked out from the narrow space of the window. She could get through it with ease. Thorkeld could also. Sithric, with sword and cloak might make shift to do so, but it looked less easy. He was taller than they, though not yet come to his full size.

Elfwin looked down to a side lane which few walked and across to an old house which projected outward over the lane. The castle rose high above, but it was the top story of the house which faced them.

The space between was not great.

Above there was a cheerless sky and rain fell.

She drew back, and Thorkeld looked out in turn, as did Sithric.

Gaining nothing thereby, they looked at her again. What was the plan ?

There was a face at the garret window of the opposite house. Elfwin waved a white scarf. A casement opened inward, and a plank was pushed out over the void. It came to rest on their own sill.

Elfwin looked at Thorkeld. "It is better than thine ?" she asked. She would have praise.

Thorkeld said, "Yes, if it be unseen. We should haste."

"Who should look ?" said the girl. That was not a great risk. Those in the lane, if any, would move under the projection of the houses that were built outward, as was then the way, or if they must come out they would bend heads to the rain. Why should they look up so high ?

Quickly done, it was likely that it would pass unseen.

Thorkeld felt the plank. It was safe enough. He was used to a windy height, as seamen are. He went first, Elfwin followed.

Sithric had stood back. He had said nothing since he had seen the way which they were to take.

He was pale, and his hand shook as he raised himself on the sill. He pushed half-way out and looked down onto the lane. He drew inward.

Elfwin came back. He saw the plank bend somewhat beneath her weight, though not much.

She said, "What is wrong?"

He was slow to reply, but said, "I like not the plank. I am more heavy than you. . . I will join you below."

Elfwin was back in the room now.

He drew out his sword. He turned to the door.

She called out in a sharp fear, "Sithric, it is vain! You would be killed. There are six at the outer gate."

She thought more than she had time to say. Should he force the door at the passage-end, it would be with outcry that would rouse the castle. There would be fifty to bar his way before he could be down the great stair. It was madness — death — to go out thus, with his sword bare.

And for what? It was a good elm plank, firm and thick, nigh a foot broad. It did not sway like a high bough in the wind. It was but a few strides across. It could be walked in the dark. It could not be that he feared *that.*

Even so, a man should hold down his fear when his reason shows him the safer way. He is a fool else, and weak.

She was of a gentle kind, but for weakness she had no love.

She could not comprehend the fear that he felt, and still less that he should let it rule his steps, but it was with her then as it was ever at the crises that changed her life.

She was different from the great race from which she came, the race that held back the North for a hundred years, the one barrier which it might not break. But at the great moments she was great as they, with a difference which was of herself and no other.

Her mind was leisured and clear and cool. She saw that there were for him three ways, one of which he must now take, and that for her there was only one if his life or honour were to last till the sunset came.

There were three ways for him. He could go back to his room. That was shame. He could go down the stair. That was death. He could follow where she led, and that she must make him do.

She changed her tone when she saw that her first cry had stayed him and that he stood irresolute at the door. She spoke very quietly now and without haste.

"Sithric, you must come. There is no danger at all. Thorkeld will think you coward; and delay is risk to us all."

He looked as a man in agony. He said, "You cannot understand. It is a dread I have always. I should surely fall."

She went up to him, catching his left hand in both of hers.

She said, "Sithric, put up the sword. I fear steel." It was a lie such as she would seldom tell.

He put up the sword.

She said, "You love me, Sithric ?"

He answered, "You know that. You know it well."

Now she did not try to show that there was no danger to dread. She said, "It is a dreadful way, but I go first. If you follow not where I go, by God's cross, you come never to me. Did you say you would come to me through hell ?"

"I would that," he said again. "You know it well."

She drew him as she spoke. She had to leave his hand as she got out, but he stood as one tranced, ashamed to retreat and being sick with a great fear.

She reached inward for his hand again which he gave.

As she drew him out he saw that he must fall when he stood on that narrow plank with the great void below. He had his first thought of her. He said, "If I slip you will loose my hand."

She laughed denial, not being afraid at all.

"I will not loose. If you fail now it is both. But we do not fail. We go in here."

Her eyes went to the window at the further side, drawing his to follow. He was over before he knew. After all, it had been a little thing. He would never fear depth again.

He stood with Thorkeld in a garret room where he must bend somewhat, for the ceil was low. Elfwin went back, not saying what she did, to fetch the wallet which he had left unthought at the last.

He was ashamed to meet Thorkeld's eye. He said, "I have ever dreaded a great depth. There are those that do."

Thorkeld said, "Yet you came." That was the marvel to him, for he knew what such fears can be.

Elfwin came swiftly back. "I have barred the door," she said. "I was just in time. It was a saint's grace that it all chanced as it did. Had I not gone back they had seen us here. Now they beat on the door. They must have found that something is wrong."

While she said this, the plank was drawn in. The casement closed. They went down a stair, steep and dark. They came to a yard in which were three horses saddled. Cynfrid was there.

Thorkeld's face twitched, as it would when he tried to smile. He looked at the horses and at Elfwin who understood.

"So you bought three ?" he said.

Elfwin looked at him as one who mocks. "I bought not three. One is mine."

He thought she had changed her mind as a woman will.

The yard opened to another lane, away from the castle. That was well. They rode for the Iron-gate, none of them being over-sure of the way, but they dared not to stop to ask, nor to seem unsure.

Yet they came to it unchecked.

The gate stood wide, and the road-space was bare. There was none that passed through. It was a way

which had been little used in the last two days, save by those who had been driven forth, for it led to the Danish lands.

There was a tower rising above the wall on the left hand, and they saw pikes that sheltered on the side from which the rain drave. Two of these came forward to close the way. There was the opening of a guard-room door, and the out-coming of others as they approached.

Elfwin said, "I could not learn who captains the guard or what force he has for it is not in Egbert's charge; but we must pass in peace for there are bowmen on the wall. It were a risk to ride through."

It was more than a risk for, had they escaped hurt themselves, the bowmen must have brought the horses down, one or all, and that would have stayed their flight.

She said, "You must leave this to me."

She rode first.

She faced a call to halt and the crossing of pikes.

She asked, "Who is the captain here ?"

There was a minute's delay before he came, for he had been at ease before the fire nursing a hurt foot, and his boots were off.

He was a man of no great rank, for there had been so many fallen that there were few left for the needs of the captured town. He was from the north Staffordshire levies, a man that she did not know, which was an ill chance.

He was in a bad humour at being called forth in the rain, but he spoke civilly enough.

"Lady, you cannot pass now. I have orders that no more go out by this gate till the Queen returns. There have been those leave today who should not have passed."

Elfwin said, "Then why standeth the gate wide if you let none through ?"

"There are still those who should come in."

"Yet," she said, "you must let these lords through. It is for that I am here."

He did not know her and he stood firm.

"Lady, I have said that none may pass. It is the lord Hunno's order of an hour since. I know not why I was called forth." He looked at those who had summoned him out into the rain, and one of them said something to him in a tone of explanation or warning, but the words were low.

Elfwin said, "Know you who I am ?"

It seemed he had just learnt.

She went on, "Orders are not for me. These lords must go forth, and I have come myself to let you know that you do right. I go with them a short space, by which you know it is well. . . Would you bar the Etheling, Egbert, should he ride out ?"

The man hesitated. It was a difficult question. He was not really competent for the position he held, though an honest man.

As he did not reply she went on,

"Of course you would not, which is well, for he will be here in a short space. He follows with escort for my return. If you bar him here I must come back alone. Would you that ? Think you so to please the Queen ?"

It was a bold lie for he might likely have said that they should wait till Egbert came, and that he would soon be there was a matter of little doubt. The thought did come to the captain's mind, but he thought also that if they were such as fled they would not wish to secure that those who pursued should be let through. He was in a perplexity, not knowing what should be done, and she gave him no time for further thought. She rode on, and the others were close behind. If he hesitated, his men had no mind to use violence to stay her. She was the Queen's daughter.

They rode quietly till they were out of bowshot and then put on the greatest pace that they could so that there was no speech till they came to the hill when they reined up to a walk, for the horses must be saved for the longer need.

Elfwin put her hand to her pouch and drew forth a handful of gold.

She said, "This is thine. It was beyond my need."

Thorkeld took it, but picked out from the links a coined piece which he handed back.

"Is it so ?" she said. "He should have spent that first." She put it back with indifference.

"The horses are not bought." — she spoke to Thorkeld for Sithric rode somewhat apart and said nothing — "You can use them as far as you will, but they are to be in Nottingham in a month's space. That is pledged in my name. But all else is bought."

She meant the harness and the well-filled saddlebags which Cynfrid had furnished for their journey's needs. She gave details for the return of the horses. Cynfrid had had an easy bargain with these, their owner being well pleased to get them forth of the town under such a pledge, for he had a wife in Nottingham and would flee there when he had got in some debts which he was loth to lose.

Thorkeld noticed that her own horse bore no baggage. He doubted what her purpose might be.

He said, "You did well to come. You will have good welcome in York."

"I am not for York. That you know. When Egbert cometh I ride back."

Her words recalled the scene at the gate to his mind.

He said, "You lie well." He meant praise.

She was surprised. She answered, "I lie never." She thought it true.

He reminded her of her words at the gate.

"But that," she said, "is how I willed it to be. Egbert will come in pursuit and he shall guard me back. I would not ride here alone. We are in the Danish pale."

She was puzzled in mind. Had she lied ? She had heard men say that she lied before now when she had meant truth.

She spoke again, "I would that Egbert would come. He is a slow man. I ride here too far."

"That would not I," Thorkeld answered. "I have no will to fight. I would win clear."

"That is what you shall," she said confidently. "You will not meet him at all. But I am hard placed if he does not come."

She was heeding little of what she said for she thought ever of Sithric, as he of her.

It had been a strange thing that had been, and she knew that he felt shamed. She would not part so. What were best to be said ?

She spoke of York. Would they find all quiet ?

Thorkeld thought they would. Sithric had ruled it well in the summer days. He had banished those who made plots. He had chosen men he could trust. There was better rule in Northumbria than had been for many years in that land which had ever been a place of fierce feuds, of fired thorpes, and of wasted lands. Guthrum Ericsson might boast of peace in the Danelaw, but he thought not of the north beyond Humber flood, of Deira and Bernicia, where Saxon had fought with Saxon, Dane with Dane, since Oswulf fell to the daggers of his own thanes, a hundred and fifty years before. . .

Elfwin was glad, hearing his praise. She said, "He hath done much, being young. He will make sure rule."

Sithric spoke then. He said, "So you speak, but you think of me as a child. I am coward to you, and in a foolish way, as one who fears shades in the dark. Yet it is so with some. I will tell you this.

"When I was young I climbed where I would. I had no such fear. I was on the hills in the night. The moon shone on a path. It seemed but a few steps below. I jumped down and it was far off and I fell. I lay there all night, being too bruised to move. The next day I was found.

"Since then I have feared ever to face a depth or to jump a gap. When it has been shallow or small and I have done it of need or shame, none has guessed how I felt. Often I have said, 'I will not go' or 'I will not come,' or 'I go no farther today,' and have feared lest it were known why, but it has been guessed of none.

"But I think that the fear is gone, and it is you that I thank."

Elfwin was not quick to reply for she tried to understand that which was strange.

Thorkeld spoke first. He said, "When I went on my first voyage, I was a boy of twelve years. I was taken by Halca, who was half-brother on my father's side. He had a boy-slave that he had caught in the Spanish land. This boy would not climb. Halca said once, as a sport, that he should go to the mast-head. It seemed

nothing to do, though the ship rolled on the swell. Our ships' masts are not high, as you know. Yet he feared, and was beaten, and at last he climbed and was seized with a dread so great that he could not come down. I would have gone to his aid, but Halca laughed and denied me.

"In the end he fell off into the sea.

"He swam after us, and we watched him long, for the wind was light. He kept near, but he could not gain.

"Halca would not lie to though the men murmured against him. He said, 'Let him drown.'

"But there was a Spanish galley that sailed near, and it was thought that they would pick him up, and Halca remembered that he was a slave that was worth gold, so we hauled on the yard and he climbed over the side.

"I said to Halca. 'Give him to me' (for he had promised a gift), which he did, and Heled — so he was called — climbed no more though he said that the fear had gone."

Elfwin said, "It was a good deed."

"It was good for myself," Thorkeld answered. "He has been with me ever. He is captain of my new ship *Farsearcher* now, which sails out in the spring. He is the best I have."

Elfwin said, "It is strange to fear without cause. It sounds devil's work. It could not come to one who prays to the saints. Yet it is a great thing to overcome, and they can be few who would so prevail."

It pleased her to think of Sithric as of one bewitched,

for her witchcraft had shown the greater might. The more he had fear, the greater must be his love, which was a good thought.

But she could not understand. If she should walk on a height's edge she knew that she would die if she slipped, but she did not slip. If she should use a knife she knew that she could cut her hand, but she would do neither for they would be foolish things. There was nothing to fear.

She knew that, had the plank lain on the ground, Sithric would have walked along it without thought of falling to either side. Very well; then being without reason it was devil's work. Anyway, there had been enough said. She was never of those who waste words on an ended thing.

The road was flatter now. It ran so high that they could have seen far over the winter fields and the woods that lay round them, deep and dense, but that the rain still fell and there was mist and already the light of the short day was lessening to the approach of night.

They could have gone at a better pace, but Elfwin listened ever for the coming of those that they had cause to dread. She had come far enough.

She was of a mind to ride back alone, for the road had been very quiet. The land cowered in fear. Whether the churl favoured Saxon or Dane he was in an evil case, not knowing whether the Saxons would hold Derby when the summer came or advance northward beyond its walls. And this doubt was a coming shadow to the

Danelaw folk to which they were less used than were their Saxon kinsmen of Mercia or the southern shires. For having been conquered from the first, they had had peace of a kind, and the English population of the Danelaw was more prosperous and probably larger than that of the harried lands which still fought for a freedom which they might not wholly win.

. . . Elfwin reined back her horse. "I hear hoofs."

Her companions listened. They could hear nothing but the noise of wind and of rain that beat on the naked boughs of the wood and on the leaves of the hollies, for this was a place where the road was narrow through the closing trees.

But she said, "I can hear hoofs. I must go back. They must not reach us. You are safe now, in your friends' land."

Now they also could hear the sound of pursuit. Leave-taking must be brief if she were to have her way.

It was a time when men did not part without tears, for they met seldom again. It was not so much that it was a time of war and of civil brawl and rough chances of flood and field, it was that means of transit were few and perilous, and there were no sure ways by which letters could be sent, even among those who could read what the paid scribe would write and could pay the charges of the post. To part was like death.

Elfwin gave the viking a small cool hand. He was one she had known for two days and of whom she had heard before. She liked him well.

"It may be that we meet again. You are Sithric's friend."

He agreed, but with little heed. All his wandering life he had heard such words. Some he would meet again. He was more like to hear of how they had died. There was much news of mouth in these days, when there was little written or read.

He rode on at a slow pace.

. . . Sithric's horse came close. Hands met and held. She gave rain-wet lips.

"You will remember all," she pleaded, "all that I said. It was well thought. It will bring us through."

He was less sure of that than she. He was of the less confident hope that she should so be won. His way was the sword. He liked not to part and wait. Yet he could not say that there was a surer path. He gave his word, as he must, hearing a sob that broke her words, to her own surprise. He was not one for tears. His eyes were blind with the rain.

She said, "You will write often — you will tell all ? . . . I will send to you every week."

She would not say how, even to him. It was to betray Mercia if there should be war, which she could not do, even to him.

For her mother had news from many lands, whether in peace or war. Of those with whom she did not correspond herself, Edward sent on letters from Winchester. They were not only from secret agents in the

British lands. They came from far. From Spain and France and Flanders, where Christian men fought the North in an agony like to theirs. From the Saxon School at Rome. Even from Hungary and Byzantium. They were all written in the Latin, which all could read, and which was spelt (more or less) in one way. Those who wrote in the vulgar tongues must make their own spelling, and had then written what few could read. . .

But these two could, at least, get letters to one another, which few could in those days, being so parted. They felt little comfort from that.

"You will guard yourself," she said, in a new fear, "you will cleanse wounds ? They are death else. . . I will pray long. . . Mary is kind. . . I must go now, they come near."

Strangely through her heart, like a new-born snake, there came a pang of jealous fear as their hands loosed.

She said, "Till we meet . . . you will kiss none but me ?"

He swore it by many gods.

She teased, in a change of mood, "They are poor oaths." She was grave. "You shall swear by your mother's name."

So he swore.

She said, "Go — go — they are at the road's bend."

He rode on.

He joined Thorkeld on a darkening road. They lis-

tened awhile as they rode, ready to use spurs or to take to the wood's cover if pursuit should sound; but none came.

Thorkeld said, "She hath turned them back. She is a queen born. . . Get her in York, with a Danish babe, and you will rule this land to the southern sea."

Sithric said, "She wills a slow way, and I have given pledge that it is that I will take. . . She is not cold at heart, yet she plans with a cold blood."

Thorkeld agreed to that. "It is the way of her race. There is none like them in the Christian lands, which is well for us."

Sithric said, "I am to be Christian now. So I have sworn. It is much to her."

Thorkeld did not protest. He said, "It is held by our kin in the Irish lands. . . Now this is a strange thing. With our swords we win south, but their faith moves north like a rising tide, and I have watched that we take their ways."

Sithric did not answer to that. He cared little whether he followed the Saxon faith or the Saxon ways. He felt still the clinging hand, and the rain-wet lips, and reason told him that it was a slender chance that they would be his again, either by sword or wile.

Thorkeld thought the same in his heart, but there are some things which we may think but we need not say.

CHAPTER XIII

The Etheling of Wroxeter, left by the malice of fate to be the governor of Derby tower amidst stronger wills and keener wits than his own, was a troubled man when word was brought that Sithric's room had been found empty, and the barred room of which we know, being broken in, had revealed the way of his flight as far as it could be shown by a window from which the bars had been loosed and which opened into the empty air.

It was due to Anselm's restless suspicion that a visit had been made to Sithric's room almost immediately after he had left it, and to his prompt interpretation of the position that there had been immediate search for Elfwin and Thorkeld, with a result which need not be told.

The fugitives were still at the Iron-gate when Anselm and Egbert faced one another in the great hall. The old man's fury and fear — for he thought that Elfwin had fled with her lover to York, and he saw that such an event might turn the scale against the Saxon cause and sweep the land with a new and final tide of rapine and fire — beat down with its trembling energy the slow obstinacy of one who would have left an event in which the Queen's daughter was so engaged for herself to deal with on her return.

"You must to horse! — to horse!" he said passionately. "You should hang if you wait an hour — "

"Hang ?" said the Etheling with a slow anger of his own. "Am I keeper of the Queen's daughter ? Had I charge from any to hold her in ? Was it known that she would be here ? If you knew so much, thy neck might be that to break."

"St. Olave give me patience !" said the old priest, his words beating down the Etheling's deliberate speech. "Would you prate while the realm falls ? You must to horse. I have sent word to Hunno already. They will out by the northern way. . ."

"They might ride for Nottingham," said Egbert, not entirely without reason.

But the bishop would not have it. "They are for York, man — for York ! They will take the short way. They may be already on the road. . . You know not Elfwin as I. She may have had horses await. . . I would that Hunno had closed the gates ! But that will be done by this. He will search the town though it must be room by room. We will find them if they be within. He must patrol the wall. I would have this right ere the Queen come ! . . . But if they are through the gate you must ride them down though the horses die."

"I know not," said Egbert, "that I should leave the tower. I am in charge here by the Queen's word."

"You would make a saint curse," said the frantic priest. "What should harm the tower ? Will you guard the shell when the kernel is taken forth?

Would you sit here doing nought when the Queen comes?"

The last word had weight. Would he be there when the Queen came? He would rather not. He got to horse with some speed, the admonitions of the old priest in his ears as he rode forth that he should be of a resolution that was needed at such a pass, that he should "seize and slay."

Had Anselm been ten years younger and able to sit a steed, there had been difference in the events that followed.

Egbert quickly learnt the way they had gone and made some speed in pursuit, but he was a cautious man. He rode in a hostile land, he knew not how far nor what he might have to meet. He rode out with thirty men, thinking them too few, and ordering that more should follow.

The road was narrow and the surface not too good. They could ride three abreast and yet be clear of ditch or the hanging bough, but four was a risk. Riding so, men must keep their places in the rank and file. The pace is not that of the best horse, though the beasts themselves will make some effort to move at a level speed.

They made the less speed and the more noise, giving the longer warning, so that the parting was of a length that we know.

Egbert rode first. He was one of a stolid courage, not

to be contemned too much, though he showed poorly in this.

They were an hour from the gate, or it might be more, when he was aware of a horse-woman who rode toward him through the rain, along a road on which the dusk was falling.

He reined up none too soon for he was not quick in command, nor did she, for she meant him to halt perforce, so that at the last, she pulled her horse round, closing the way as much as she might, and Egbert, riding ahead of his men, was almost into her before he came to a halt, at his horse's will as much as by his own rein.

Elfwin called, "Who are you? Would you ride me down ?" though she knew who came, and her tone was such as she seldom used to any, being of quiet ways.

Anselm would have had words enough, but Egbert was slow to reply. He knew not what to do or to say. It was an awkward thing to begin.

He had been frightened into belief that Elfwin had fled with the Dane. Here she was, fleeing from none, and using such tone as a queen's daughter will. (He had never met her till the previous day.)

He had wit enough to leave her part in this for those of higher rank than his to resolve. He kept to his own point, saying at last,

"Lady, the Dane fled — the King Sithric that I was charged to hold. I must ride on, on his track. I thought not to meet you here."

"Yet we are well met," she answered, in a quieter voice than before, "for I am here alone and must have escort back. You can turn your men and we will talk on the way."

"Lady, I cannot that. I must catch the Dane. I will leave you two men."

"Two men?" she asked, with a tone of wonder. "We are deep in the Danelaw lands. Am I worth but two? You must think me of little worth."

"You could ride with us," said the harassed man. He might have asked with more point what she did there at all, but he lacked courage or wit, or, it may be, both. "Could I that?" she asked in a fresh wonder. "Will you say where I should lodge? The night falls. . . But we waste words and time — and time is short. I must meet the Queen this night. There have been things of which we must talk." — Her words gave him a feeling, perverse to fact, that it was of him that she would make complaint to the Queen. — She asked again, "Will you order that they turn, that we may ride back?" And then, when she saw that he would not move, for he knew not what to do, she went on, "You came here thinking that King Sithric had fled, and that he was to be brought back by you. But he has fled not at all. He went forth of my will, and I showed the way. It was to show that he did not flee, but went at my own will, that I have ridden with him so far. . . But the folly is not yours. I know well that it is Bishop Anselm that has edged you on. . . Did he not say, 'The

Lady Elfwin has gone. She will not return. She will to York if she be not stayed.' ?" He did not deny that, and she went on,

"Men have been hanged for less. Were he not priest it were a stretched neck when the Queen hears. What right has he to speak such shame ? . . . But I will hold you clear. I will tell my mother that it was not thy thought . . . Will you order your men ?"

But he held to his point with the persistence of the slow-witted. There was one thing he knew. He had been told to keep Sithric till Ethelfleda returned. She had told him that with her own lips. He would ride on.

Elfwin said, "Would you that ? Then I can do no more for your help. No one could. What can you do in the night ? Think you that you chase babes ? Bear Thorkeld is old in war. They will hear you a mile behind. Think you they will keep the road ? If they ride not well ahead, they will turn by fordrough or forest path. You see nought. You ride on. How far will you go ? You are deep in the Danelaw land. Soon or late, you come back. They will have roused men. You will be one to ten. It will be well for you if you die. Would you ride back and say you have lost a score on so wild a chase ? Is it the Queen's way so to waste lives ? Your charge is Derby tower, where you should now be. You can do nought in the night."

Her last words were plain sense as he saw, and at that he turned. He had the thought that Anselm's worst

fear had been that Elfwin had fled; and he brought her back. He had not ridden for nought.

On the way back Elfwin drew from him that Hunno was searching the town, house by house, at which she was ill pleased, till she considered (which he had not) that it must have stayed when it was learned that they had passed the gate. But she asked him if the Queen would be pleased that they vexed the town like a stirred hive, of which he had some doubt, and it somewhat quickened the pace of their return, which was what she would, for she had more to do, and she had saved her horse as much as she might so that she could have made more speed.

As they came near to the town, she considered that she might get in more easily than she would get out again by the western gate.

At the best, it would mean words with Anselm or Hunno, and she had had words enough. She might not talk so much in a week, not having the like cause.

She said now, "There must be by-way to the western road ? There must be a way round the wall ?" That was sure enough.

Egbert was a beaten man. When she said that she must have ten for escort and he should tell Anselm that she rode to meet the Queen and would report the follies that he had done, she had her way with no further talk.

He gave her the ten she would, and she rode round to the western road. She learnt at a wright's hut that

the Queen had not passed into the town, and she went on at the best pace that the men could make.

The night had fallen, but it was not yet six hours after noon. The rain had ceased and there were a few stars in the western sky which the wind cleared.

CHAPTER XIV

Hacco, who held Chester in Ethelfleda's name, was a Norwegian, if we count that a man must be of his father's kin; an Irishman, if we consider first that he had been bred in a square-cornered four-roomed tower on the Boyne bank; and a Christian if we allow it to be a religion which can be conferred by a priest's hand and voice on a protesting babe.

He had raided Anglesey, more than once, after his kind, and had grown bolder, carrying his gospel of fire and sword into the mountain valleys until the time came that he went too far and stayed a day too long, and the King of North Wales, a wary and wily man, gathered a force that cut off his retreat and shepherded him into the deeper hills without forcing a battle which he could have won at a cost that he would not pay.

For the Northmen, being cornered, would fight as a rat fights, for lust of wounding their foes, though they had lost hope of their own lives; and the King knew that, should he close on his fleeing prey, they would die, indeed, but there would be widows in Wales.

So he bayed them but would not bite, driving them

ever farther from the sea where their long-ships lay.

Seeing how it would be in the end and having no will either to starve or die, Hacco took a resolve, as he thought in the night, that where he had been driven of need he would go farther of his own choice. The next day he marched fast, leaving a puzzled pursuit ten miles in his rear, and, on the morning after, he came down into the Dee valley, telling a tale which had some truth, though not much, and throwing himself on the mercy of Ethelfleda, to whom he made offer of his own service and that of forty-two men whom he had brought through the British hills. He asked leave to settle in the Dee valley and said that his men would bring their families from the Irish land as hostages for their faith, making new homes, and that his presence would ensure that the Irish raids upon that coast would cease, for he was one having strong friends.

To these things Ethelfleda agreed, needing colonists, and all that he said he did, and in time, after there had been discord in that part in which he had kept his fealty, and proved a good man in a bitter strife, she made him lord of Chester itself and warden of the river-mouth.

Here he sat on Chester rock, as a hawk sits on a bough, watching all that passed upon the road to Wales or going east to Mercia or to the Danelaw beyond. He kept peace in the land, and though he grew rich, men did not murmur against him more than was natural against one so placed.

Ethelfleda valued his faith at less than a straw's worth.

He was not for her, he was for himself only. But he was the best she had for that post; he kept off the Northmen from Ireland as no Mercian could; and men throve in the valley lands.

He would be true while her strength held, so she judged, and she did not mean it to fail. She was right in that, but the fact is that he had begun to doubt how the end would be.

He was looking both ways, and men came from the Irish land and from the islands beyond Strathclyde, and they talked long. Also, being a christened man, he made a secret pact with his old foe in the British hills, who would not have sworn faith to a heathen Dane, even for the hate he felt for the Saxon who fed on his fathers' lands.

So Hacco showed the forethought of a prudent man. If Ethelfleda should grow too bold and overreach her strength, as he thought she might, he would come to no harm: if she stood, he had done no wrong. He slept well.

When she called up men at this last time, when the war-season was past, and for a goal which she would not say, lest the talk went on to the Five Towns, which it well might, he was loth to listen, but he dare not deny her will.

So he sent Hermild with forty men (not his best) and with excuse that there were signs of discontent in the valley, which he must watch, and that he dare not

weaken the garrison of the castle, nor of the post at the river-mouth.

Ethelfleda listened and said nothing of what she thought.

Hermild had orders from Hacco to spare his men from battle as most he could, and to return at once should he see that she had met disaster, as he thought she might.

So at the day's end, when the four assaults had failed, and all men talked of the storming of Derby as of a battle lost, and were in doubt whether to camp or fly, Hermild had ordered that the ox-teams be put in the two baggage-carts which he had brought, and started back on the Chester road, satisfied both of his own wisdom and that of his master also.

Oxen move slowly on a winter road. They should not have been sent at all, for Ethelfleda's order had been for men who could move at speed. The ox-teams for such wagons should not be less than eight, as all men know. One wagon had only six, for they had eaten two, having brought little of other provision for the march. It was in Hacco's mind that when the end of the year came and he must settle with the Queen's hoarder at Gloucester for the valley-tribute and the bridge-tolls, he could claim allowance for oxen dying on the march, as they often will, being overdriven in the zeal of men who will not be last in the battle-line. So they should feed at her cost.

It followed that Hermild travelled home at a poor pace and was the sooner caught, but it made but the difference of a few hours. He was a lost man when Ethelfleda came out through Derby gate with her six troups, riding three abreast, covering a furlong of the winter road.

She came up with Hermild in the Sow valley, in a place of thickets, and he, hearing the noise of pursuit and thinking that the Danes were on his track, gave orders to his men to scatter and let the wagons go.

This they did, and would have been hard to catch, but when they saw the Mercian horsemen they came out, Hermild among them, though with an uneasy mind.

But what else was he to do ? He could not starve in the woods. If he were under Ethelfleda's wrath, there would be none that would give him food or pass him on. He was no better than an outlawed man.

He took the chance that seemed best, coming boldly forth, as one having no cause to fear.

When they brought him to Ethelfleda she asked, "What do you here ?"

"Queen, I came away when the fight was lost, fearing pursuit, as men must scatter from a lost field."

She said, "But there was no loss. I hold Derby to-day."

Hermild stared. It was hard to believe.

He said, "Queen, had I thought that, I had stayed."

She answered, "I know it well . . . Order your men."

They were brought in rank to the last man, forty in all.

There was one with a bandaged arm. "How came that ?"

He showed the wound of a Danish shaft. Arrows fly. He might have been near or far. He should have the doubt. She said, "Stand aside."

He fell out of the rank.

She turned to Hermild. "Where left you the dead ?"

There was no answer to that.

She went on, "There should be a third dead. Why should these men live ? There are dead men who might live today had they done their part. They should draw lots to hang."

She looked at the sullen, black-browed ranks and thought, "It were just; yet it shall not be. They may have wives. There have been deaths enough."

She asked. "Who is next in rank here ?" No one was quick to reply. It seemed a perilous thing to claim. In the end they pushed forward a scar-faced man, of a British breed.

She said, "You have nought to fear, either now or ever from me if you are one who can carry a message well. You will tell Duke Hacco from me that Derby is down, and that I will do more when the frosts end. You will tell him that I thank his aid. Hermild's widow can wed for he has died at Derby gate. That is enough of him. As to when you left the field you can say what you will."

Hermild begged at her feet, at which she drew back. She said, "Tie his hands. He must hang where all men shall see." She looked at the cringing man. "Is it so much to die ? Yet it is but one more. There have been many dead at the Derby gate." She did not mean to mock. She saw facts.

CHAPTER XV

Elfwin rode with a good guard, on a road where there was little to fear.

They had ridden in single file on the narrow way that led round the city wall, but when they came to the Chester road they fell in two abreast, two pairs ahead and two behind and she riding in a sure place between the central pair as a queen's daughter should.

She cared little for that. The road was safe and lone when they were clear of the camp which still spread outward for two miles from the wall. There were few who would do her hurt in the Saxon lands. But she knew how her mother would have her keep her state, and there was enough on which to differ today without coming through the night alone like a miller's maid.

Not that it was late yet. The night had fallen, yet it was but six hours after noon. Elfwin judged that the Queen would wish to get back that night, both for the needs of the hour and for her own comfort, rather than to take such shelter as a hamlet gives, or to camp in the

winter fields. She would push on, though she might be late.

There was only one road. It seemed a sure thing that they would meet before many hours had passed. Elfwin did not count to camp out herself. Her mother would blame that she had not brought her maids from Tamworth for which there had been no time — nor thought. But for the wrangle with Athelstan she might have done other than she did.

Anyway, a good pace was best. This she said, and what they could they did. For they were men she knew. They were not of the levies of the Queen's fyrd, they were of the household guard. Well-mounted men, wearing uniform of a plain kind, with sword and axe and the short throwing-spear which was preferred to the Frankish lance for use in the wooded lands.

The word passed that the Lady Elfwin would ride at speed, and the pace quickened on a road hardening to a night-frost, but yet sloughy in parts, for it was a good road ill kept in unquiet times, and it had borne much traffic in the last week, though Ethelfleda's main advance had been by the Tamworth road.

It was not very dark for the sky cleared as the night came, and there was a low moon rising, near the full. There was little sign of the dwellings of men for few lived on the Danelaw edge. It was not a place which one would choose for a quiet life. Yet there were flickers of fire-light here and there from field-side, or the ever-encroaching woods, where there was cottage of

field-serf, or woodward or verderer, who had not gone to bed with the dark as many did, but sat to talk, or work as best he might, by the flickering light of the logs.

They rode close to one cottage from which came the noise of a roared song, such as a man might need some courage to sing in a Saxon land. It was a song which had been made by the Tronheim minstrel, Knut, and which was sung wherever the Northmen came. It went to Byzantium and up the Nile before the tide of piracy ebbed, and the tune was still in Normandy when Duke William came to Senlac field, though the words were changed.

It was not the words so much as the tune which would stir the passions, and sometimes the tears, of the wolf-hearted wanderers from the northern lands, when they had drunk deep and revelled late, at Yule or at the feast of the goddess Eastra — the feast of the moon of spring.

But its words were of a pattern cunningly made, beginning with a picture of mountain-height and forest and the deep beauty of the land-locked fiord. It showed it in a passionless quiet, dawn-cold, and cloaked with the wide white silence of the snow on which the sunrise came,

Rose-red the dawn: rose-red
The mountain snow.

And then suddenly it swept southward. A hundred long-ships came like a flight of fierce gyr-falcons to the

rapine of rich lands; and the flame of war leapt sudden and fierce and high. The song rose to a mad berserk fury and noise of strife. It soared in a clamour of words to a wild ecstasy as the last defences failed, and the Northmen stormed the ramparts of a captured town,

Stockade! Stockade! the steel-edged
axes hew.
Washeil! Washeil! the wing-helmed ranks
are through.

and then it sank to a sudden stillness, and dawn moved once more upon the coldness of Norwegian heights.

Rose-red the dawn:
Rose-red
The mountain snow.

It came to Elfwin's ears in its mid-fury of exultant song as she rode past, and it may have brought to her mind something of what she did, pledging herself to one of the race that had wrecked her land. But she gave no sign. She may not have heard at all. Her thoughts were on the interview which she had to meet — which, indeed, she sought. For though she and her mother were at a bitter difference over this thing, they were very closely one, of which its tragedy came, and she would talk of it first when none other heard, and before Ethelfleda had had speech with any.

They had ridden for two hours, or it might be more, and the pace had fallen to a walk, for the way was heavy and some of the horses were spent, when they heard the sound of those they sought; and going on without fear, for there was little chance of any foes at that place and time, they met the horsemen that Ethelfleda had taken forth, or, at least, all but one troop; but she herself was not there.

For their captain told that she had sent them on to find their rest in the town and to bring word that she came and that all was well. But she lay at a hamlet some eight miles back, having kept one troop for her guard, and would come on with the dawn.

Elfwin said, "I must on."

There was some debate over this. The captain said, "Lady, there will be nowhere for the horses to stand, or the men to lie. It is an ill place, and small." He would have turned her back if he could.

She could not pass till he gave word for his men blocked the way.

He said, "Lady, it will be late. They will have been long at rest. Your horses tire. They will make slow way."

She said, "If they tire, it were longer to ride back."

He said, "Yet they would reach fodder and stall at last."

But she said, "Even so, I must on. Yet I will take but two. We shall be well enough. The road is lone and dark. I will take the best horses you have."

She chose two men from her own guard. There was some changing of steeds. The horsemen closed in as they might. There was narrow space at the side, going close to a bank where the thorns caught. It seemed long till the last troop was past, and they could make speed on a bare way. It was not much then, for the road grew worse, and to ride hard would have risked a fall in the dark, and when they came to the place they sought it was late, and no lights showed in the hamlet.

But there was a watch-fire, burning bright and high at the roadside, and two horsemen who watched; and, learning who came, one of them guided Elfwin to the farm-house where the Queen lay.

They roused Gerda, one of the Queen's maids, who came down with a lit lamp.

They spoke first in the kitchen, stepping over men who lay on the floor.

Elfwin said, "Is my mother ill, that she stays here ?" For she knew her ways.

Gerda said, "She was tired that she could ride no more. She hath not strength that she had, which she is loth to own. I have said that they shall bring a litter here, coming from Derby through the night, that she can travel at ease. She may be wroth, but it is how it should be."

"You did well. Where can I lodge ? I would not rouse her tonight."

"That is hard to say. There are three in a bed here,

and it is the floor for most. The Queen hath her room. I sleep there at her feet."

There came Ethelfleda's voice from the stair-head.

"Gerda, what is wrong ? Who is here ? Is all well in the town ?" She knew that it is ill news that comes in the night.

Elfwin called, "It is I, mother. All is well."

She went up.

They said no more then. They were both of those who can hold their words. She went into her mother's bed, which was small. They lay close. Their hands met and held, for till this thing came they had loved well.

CHAPTER XVI

Elfwin slept, having done much, and having come where she would be, but Ethelfleda lay awake in the night.

Once Elfwin stirred and spoke low, and her mother heard partly of what she said, though she was not sure. Did she say, "He hath won free" ? Ethelfleda was not surprised if he had, for she knew that Elfwin must have come by the Derby road. Had she let Sithric go, it would be her way to come here, to tell it herself.

Ethelfleda was not grieved at the thought. She was eased by a lifted load. So she felt, for she had dreaded what she must do should Sithric stand firm, and of how

she would tell Elfwin, as she would, for that was her way too.

She knew now that she would be glad if he had got free, and there was no more she could do, but to know this brought fear also.

"I grow weak and old," so she thought. "I am a blunt tool in God's hand. Soon he will throw me down as is right. Yet I would not fail while I live."

She prayed long.

She was of those who seldom think of the past, having full days. But her mind went back, as she lay thus, and no sleep came. It opened old rooms of memory, where the light of thought had not come for a length of years, and the dust lay.

. . . Elfwin lay at her side as she lay now, but she was a very tiny babe; healthy, it was said, but very lean. She was not like a Saxon babe. She was praised by the women round, but there would be a second's space before they spoke, while they picked their words. That was when she had black hair (for with that she was born), but her eyes were yet blue.

. . . Ethelred came to the bed's foot. He scarcely looked at the babe. He said, "It is well so." He was always kind. But she knew that he would have had a son.

. . . There was a voice on the stair, that came through the open door, for the room was still. The voice said, "It is like an elf."

Very well. If God sent her an elf, she should not be shamed, nor the child.

She was of those who face fact.

. . . She was before the font. The priest asked her to name the child. He said, "That is no Christian name." She answered, "But it will be so from this day." She had had her will. It was a strange name for one who was Ethel-born, for it showed not her rank.

. . . She had told Ethelred that she would have no more children, and why. He had said little. The plan was good, as he knew. They knew how the royal houses had fought in the past years. It was a tale of blood and of a ruined land. Also, he knew that she had a will that would not bend.

He had said little, but he had walked apart. They had been lonely days. Only, when trouble came, he would come to her and would wait her word. If she said, "We have force to fight," he would take her plan and would lead men forth and do his part well enough. If she said, "We are less strong than they; they must burn what they will. We must wait the chance," he would heed and wait as long as she would. They had ever acted as one.

. . . Then he fell ill. There had been whole years when he could not get to horse, and she had taken his place. She had toiled hard. It had been toil and prayer and a war that would never cease.

. . . She had been much away from the child, but in the winter days, or in a pause of summer peace, when

she would be resting in the palace at Gloucester, Elfwin would come ever to her side, with questions she kept for her, such as she would ask of no other, and she would say strange things that she had thought in the woods where she would spend her days as much as she might, and they would talk long.

. . . There was once that she had been reading to her of the lives of the holy saints, and she had asked many questions of marriage and chastity and of the virgin mother of God, and why had her mother married if there were a higher life ? And she had answered that it was the duty of queens, so that there should be others to rule the land when they were dead. And the child had asked further questions, and she had answered that she would have no brothers or sisters ever, and had thought it a good time to tell her, young as she then was, of the future which had been destined for her, as the one who would heal the old feud and give peace to the Saxon lands, when the heathen should be driven out in the good time of God, so that she might get used to the thought while she was young and accept it later as a settled thing.

It had seemed that she listened but lightly to these later words, and what she thought even her mother could not tell, or how far she understood, but at last she said, "Mother, I am your little sin," and her mother thought not much of it at the time, but the child held to the name, and when she would come to her for comfort or for counsel or to confess some fault, as she often

would, she would say, "Mother, it is your Little Sin," using it only when they were alone, and as a secret name which no other was allowed to hear.

. . . Had it all been sin and folly ? Had they done ill, thinking to shape the course of life to a better purpose than would else have been ? Had she been wrong to wed where no love was and to bring to life that which would not have been had she followed the impulses of her own heart ? The words of Thorkeld came to her, not in the wonder of the voice he used, but in contempt or condemnation, "You must have thought you were God." And against them she asserted again the plea that she had used to him. She had chosen ever the harder way.

. . . It was the day after Sithric had escaped from Gloucester — after Edward had left; and she had seen the brooch at Elfwin's throat, which she knew well. It was one that Sithric would wear when he came to the banquet on days of state, and which he had shown to her when she asked.

It was an old brooch which none could value, for it might be that it was the only one of its kind that the world held. She knew something of the old jewellery of which there had been such store in the far-off days when Rome kept the world's peace, and men could work and trade and grow rich in the law-sheltered lands; and something too of the old tongues in which their scrolls were carved. But she could read nothing of this. It was not Latin. It was not the older tongues,

Hebrew and Greek, the tongues of the world's youth, of which she knew the letters, though little more. It was not a kind of brooch which would come from the far eastern lands.

Sithric said it had been given to one of his father's kin in the far north, in a land of ice and night, where there was a remnant of people, dwarfs, who lived in the deep caves and fed on the mosses of the rocks. It was given in return for a service done, which is not of this tale, and the dwarf had said that it was a brooch that would bring fortune, strange and great, when it came to the hands of the one for whom it was meant at last, but he could not tell when that would be.

His father had tried to learn the meaning of the letters which it bore, of which the dwarf would say nought (if he knew), and he had been told by a wise woman of his own land that the lower words were hard to construe, for they might mean *Sin joins all,* or by another reading it was *Sin sunders all,* which is different enough, and above these were words that were of no remembered tongue, and there would be none who could read them — as, indeed, he had found.

Ethelfleda had said that a written tongue grows only in a settled land and in long years of peace. There was no land known where there could have been such a time and such a tongue, and it was devil's work, as, indeed, would be the thought of any, hearing of dwarf and cave and the land of the frozen night.

Seeing this brooch on Elfwin's neck she had said,

"Why wear you that ? It is Sithric's brooch."

"It was Sithric's gift."

She had paused for a time, seeking the right word, and had said,

"I would that you take it off. It is heathen work. It is not fit for Christian wear."

And Elfwin had answered, "Mother, I cannot that. It were to lie with my hand."

And there had been further words, bringing grief to both, for each fought for what was (to her) a great stake, and neither was of those who will yield.

. . . Now as Ethelfleda lay awake in the night, being outworn of body, but of a mind that could take no ease, and Elfwin lay at her side, it seemed to her that this brooch was a symbol (if not a charm in itself) of the power by which she was held, and thinking this it seemed to her that it was the devil himself against whom she fought, who would take God's land to a heathen rule, and this by means of the one in whom she had looked to see the forces of hell thrown back and the land made one.

It seemed that she fought with the devil for her daughter's soul, and the freedom of England and the Christian faith were the stakes which the winner took. And it seemed, being in the cold hour of the night when hope is hardest to hold, that God had left her without help from Him to take this battle as best she might. "You must have thought you were God." — The words would not leave her mind. She had thought, in her

foolish pride, to shape the course of the world, and now God said, "You had what you would. Bring it to what end you may. It is no work of Mine. I may have had other plans."

And then the fighting strength of her race rose indomitable, and the faith that she had held ever through the difficult years, and she thought, "If God leave me thus, I will still say that He doth well. Nor shall He call me coward at the last. If He leave me the field I will hold it as best I may."

Yet she prayed long that, had she done wrong, the scourge should fall on herself and not on the England that she loved; and she prayed also for Elfwin, and then she slept.

CHAPTER XVII

Elfwin waked with the first glimmer of the winter dawn. Her mother slept. There were movements of men below, but quiet, for they would not disturb the Queen.

She rose without noise, and found that Gerda had left her place and gone down already.

Following quickly, she found that there was bustle without, and leading of horses from crowded byres, for the Queen had said that she would ride when the dawn came.

There was a horse-litter also, come from Derby in the night, for the Queen's ease.

Gerda said, "I would let her lie, but if we wake her not she will be wroth indeed." For the men were saddling and getting to horse, as the Queen's orders had been, for she would have strict heed to her word.

Elfwin said, "I will that, if we must."

She came down in a short space, saying, "The Queen will rest for an hour. The order is changed. We do not ride till noon."

She went back and sat at the bed's side and told all that had been, even to how she had kissed in the rain. Then she waited for her mother's words.

Ethelfleda said nought for a space. She did not feel just as she had in the night. Things are different when the day comes.

She said at length, "Jarl Biorn was ever a fool. He should have pulled them down." *

Then she rose, saying no more, and Elfwin waited on her, taking Gerda's place, that she might talk if she would, but she said little, except when she was told of the litter, and then only, "Seem I so old ? I am not yet of fifty years. I could have ridden well."

So it was near the time when they must go down to a waiting meal (which would be without the morning prayers that she would always have before food was taken, for her chaplain had ridden on the night before,

* Yet there is something to be said for the Jarl on this point. A town grows, but a town wall will not alter its girth.

There were two thousand houses at this time within the great wall of York. Men said that it sheltered fifty thousand lives in its greatest day. We may pass that for a scribe's tale. Yet men must have lain close. The Jarl would not lessen roofs in the town he ruled, unless the need were great.

there being nowhere for him to lodge) that Elfwin said — for she would learn what her mother thought —

"Have I not done a good thing, winning Sithric to Christ ? It is all North-Humber is won, for they will do that which their king does. You have gladdened much at a less thing."

Ethelfleda said, "It is not done yet, and I think you meant but to win your way."

Which was true enough. That she said no more was not of wrath or ill will, but she would have time for thought.

They rode back at the noon hour, being of freer speech than had been for long, though they spoke but of small things, and they knew not where was the change; and the next morn Hermild of Chester was hanged in the Derby gate.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

Spring came to the Saxon lands. It saw women guarding the sheep on the high Wessex wolds where the wolves came seldom (for they kept to the deep weald through the warmer days), and women yoking the ox-teams and plowing the Mercian fields, for Ethelfleda made fierce war on the League of the Five Towns with every man she had, and Guthrum Ericsson could not move to their aid, for Edward was on his flank in the river lands, with a great force, moving ever, but not coming to close battle till he could be sure of its end. For while he held Guthrum at bay, he did all he would, making time for his sister to work her will; and he counted that should he force Guthrum to fight, and have the better of him, he had done no more than he did now, while should he have the worse, he had done much less.

So he made feints in the fens, while Ethelfleda laid close siege to Leicester, as she had said she would, and the jarl of that town was in bitter straits, for the store of food which had been laid in for the winter months had

run low, and there were four thousand soldiers to feed, that had been driven back into the town, besides those who dwelt there of right.

For the time had come when Ethelfleda could strike at the Danes with all her force even in the summer days, which had not been before, for the King of Gwent, seeing how things were and being wearied of war, had made peace, and taken Edward for his overlord; and with the King of North Wales she had made a sure truce; and there had been offer of peace from Northumbria; and while York was quiet she had no fear of Strathclyde.

There was no lack of men now from the Dee valley, and the Queen's hoarder at Gloucester had not been asked to make deduction from the port-dues for any oxen that had died in the stress of war.

As to Northumbria, there was talk that the King had sent to the Bishop of Rome asking for priests who could persuade men to their own faith, which he would take himself, and desired to set up again in the land where it had once been strong, for in the old time scholars and holy men had come from far lands, even from Alexandria and the distant East, to talk with its learned priests.

Also, he had sent heralds to Tamworth, asking Ethelfleda that there should be peace made, but saying nothing of that at which he aimed (as he had promised to Elfwin), to which she had made answer, without warmth, that Edward was overlord of right of the

North-Humber land, as he was of hers also, and it was to Winchester that they must go.

There had been murmuring at this, even among her own thanes, for they remembered when Wessex had been no more than a province of the wider Mercian rule, and they thought that she could have made a strong peace with the North, and become such that she could have shaken off the Wessex yoke, of which she counted little, but they much.

But, as ever, she did what she would.

CHAPTER II

It was at the end of April that Leicester fell.

In the next month there was news that Edward had defeated Guthrum Ericsson in a great battle beyond Ely, and that Northampton was taken.

After that it was known that Guthrum had knelt to Edward as his overlord, and would pay tribute, lest his fate were worse should he fight more.

It was at this time, when all went well for the Saxon cause, that a letter came to Elfwin, who was at Worcester, by a secret hand which she did not know.

It was from Sithric, and written by a scribe in the Latin tongue.

It may be rendered thus:

Sithric, King of Deira, king and overlord of Bernicia, and of all the North-Humber land, from his

royal palace at York, to the Lady Elfwin, heiress of Mercia, at Gloucester, or where else she may be, to her own hand.

I write this in the Latin tongue, being a great matter, that its truth may be given to you in the words which you can best read, and the meaning of which you can surely weigh.

I have done all that you said, though, at times, with a poor will, as you know, but the King your uncle will have nought, or, rather, he must have all. I sent an envoy to Winchester, one of trust, offering friendship and peace. I told him to make as good terms as he might, but to yield much if the need were.

Edward claimed all. He said, "York is Saxon town. Let him go back to his own kin in the north." He was offered that I would take him as overlord, so that he would be king of the whole land. That was more than he could lightly take. He would have to come far and to fight hard and be at a great charge.

He said, "Doth he ask no more? Is that all?"

Sweyn said, "He asks no more," for so it had been promised to you that it should be said.

But Edward broke out with sudden words (so it is told), "It is all false! It is my niece he would have."

So Sweyn said, "Even so, were it not well? He is Christian now. It would weld all in a sure whole."

But the King said, "You can tell him to cease his dream. I weld this land in my own way, which is not his. There shall be no Dane wed in my house. Let

him swear by his old oaths, and by the Virgin that bore God (your God, who is now mine), that he will ask never again, nor think of my niece's hand, and he can come into my peace, on such terms as I will then say. But without that I will pledge nought."

Your uncle goeth too far in this. I am a great king. I have strong friends in the north. What I did was at thy plea. Now I think of a sharper way. I will take my will at the sword's point. Thorkeld is here. He builds new ships on the Tyne for a thing which he doth not tell to all. His word is that I do well. He saith that of you which I will not write. He saith also that if I take you by force you will be glad at heart, though you may be wroth of word at the first. I would think that.

He saith that Wessex is strong today, yet every chain hath a weak link, and that link he hath shown; for he ponders much of war though he fights little.

Think of me that I shall be in Gloucester walls ere the leaves fall. We will raise Mercia clear of the Wessex claim, and you shall be queen in all. Do not answer this. I have ceased to write till I kiss your lips. I have kissed none else as I swore. We will have good days.

It hath been long to wait, doing nought, but now I move and am glad.

Elfwin read this letter with care, and did not look pleased. It had been slow to reach her hand, having

been to Gloucester first, then to Tamworth, and last to Worcester, where she had just come, having a charge there which there is no space to tell.

She said, "I must journey again," and she called her maids, with no loss of time, that they should prepare all, with the best horses that the town held, which were few, for they had all been taken for the war.

Then she wrote to Sithric, saying this,

My uncle is hard to move, and I see that you have done much. I do not blame how you feel. Yet this rests not with him. I will try a last throw. If you have care for my peace you will do nought till I write again. If I come not to you I will kiss none till I die. I will write soon, but, on your love, do nought till you hear more.

So she wrote, showing the fear in her heart, for it was not her way to say one thing twice.

She sent this letter, by the best means she knew, giving gold with a loose hand, and promising more when she should learn that it had reached its end.

Then she took horse for Leicester, where her mother made order, and received the submission of the League. For the jarls of Nottingham and Stamford and Lincoln came there to swear fealty to her, having heard that Guthrum had lost, and having no hope of help coming from York.

Ethelfleda seemed younger at this time, and as one

who would never tire. All her life she had fought her way up to Trent bank or been driven back to the Watling Street as the war swayed, but no Mercian had passed its stream, save the wrist-bound women that the Danes would bear off as their fancy led.

All those years she had prayed ever that she might live to see England a Christian realm, though Trent flood she could never cross, either by peace or war; but she was over now — over Trent and Soar — and Danes were yielding even to the northern border of the Dane-law pale, or flying to the coast and taking ship to their own land.

Elfwin came to her in the castle of Leicester which was no more than a wooden hold at that time built of oak beams, for its jarl had lacked the stone which can be quarried in the Derby hills.

Her mother greeted her well, being glad at heart of the great gains she had made, and thinking that all went to her mind. She did not think that God had left it to her at this time. She gave Him the praise.

Yet, when the first words had been said, she went on, "Though I greet you well, I like it not that you come, leaving your charge at Worcester. For a charge should not be left, be it great or small. There must be strong cause to show. Is it Sithric again ?"

For so she guessed, knowing more than she said, for her spies had brought word but a few hours before that there was arming in York, and talk of war, though

against whom none could say, for Sithric would not tell though he gathered horses and stores.

Elfwin said, "Mother, you know well that I would not come for a light cause. It is Sithric, indeed. My uncle drives him too hard. Have you never enough of war ? He is Christian now. If I go to York he will wed me there and will trouble Mercia never again. That I pledge. I will marry Athelstan never, and you and my uncle will shake the realm for a thing which can never be."

Her mother answered to this, "I have thought of that, too. I would I could give you that which you will, for you would have better life than mine hath been, though God hath given me my heart's dream at the last.

"But your uncle will not have it so, and I think he is right, looking farther than we.

"For you must think of this. You are heiress to Mercia by a birth which you cannot change, and your son will be of the same right, though he be a Dane born. When the first discord comes, as it will ever in the dealings of kings, he will remember that, and there is war loosed on the land by us, though we may be all dead. You may say you will train him to other thoughts, but we cannot tell of what kind are the babes which our wombs bear, which is grief to all, and most to those to whom God giveth the rule of men."

And Elfwin said, "Mother, you mean you would that I had never lived."

And the Queen answered, "I would not that. You are more dear than any word can say, or than you can know till you have carried one under your own heart. Yet if you wed not Athelstan, and that with such speed that Sithric may cease his dreams ere worse follow, it had been better for this land and for me and for your own soul, that you had been still-born, as might well have been in those days when the Danes chased us from byre to byre and there was no food in the land."

Elfwin asked, "Do you curse me, mother ? For so it sounds."

Her mother answered, "I would never curse you, come what may. But I say you are cursed of God if you will not do that which would make the realm sure, and that is a worse thing than to be cursed of me."

Elfwin said, "Mother, if you think that, I will back where I came, for there hath been enough of words between us two."

Ethelfleda said, "Will you bring new war to the land ?"

Elfwin answered, "You know I would never that. I would liever die."

But she would say no more, and when her mother asked for her at a later hour (for she would have talked with her anew), she learnt that she had taken horse again, without staying for rest or food.

And Ethelfleda slept ill that night.

CHAPTER III

Cynfrid came to Elfwin whom he served at this time.

"Lady," he said, "there is news which you may think ill. The scrivener in the church-close to whom I gave thy letter, being a very honest man, hath handed back thy gold, for he thinks that the letter will not have reached York. There is news that he who carried it was slain in the hills, though it is doubted how."

Elfwin said, "That is evil indeed. I had another for the same hand, but it might be vain now, even could it be sent." She added, "Come to me in three hours, for I would think well."

It was three days before this that Edward had had sure news that there would come war from the north, and had sent a swift post to his sister (who had heard the like from her own spies), that they should act together to crush this thing ere it grew great. He called also the captain of his own guard, and gave him an urgent charge. "You will to Worcester at speed. You will bring the Lady Elfwin to me, treating her in all honour, yet taking no denial at all."

"Using force, if need were ?" the captain asked, who would be clear on so great a thing.

"Using such force as you must, if the need be."

"What if we be opposed with arms ? We are not loved of many in the Mercian land, and their lady may not be lightly seized."

"There will be no use of arms," said the King, "for

Worcester is bare of men, save the infirm and old. The Lady Ethelfleda hath levied all that she might, and they are not yet home. Yet you must use force if the need come. You may do all but fail."

So the captain took the road in an hour's time, being a good man, as the King knew. . .

. . . Elfwin thought, "Sithric will make war by now. He will make great war, for he hath a great will to win. Also, he hath strong friends. In the end he will bring in Denmark, and all the North. He will make me queen of a ruined land, and it was a true word that my mother spoke that it were better that I had never been.

"It was not fault of mine that the letter failed, which I meant well, yet I think it shows that I am indeed cursed of God, for the saints would not guard him who carried it, knowing from whom it came."

She thought of him whom she had sent to his death in the Pennine hills, and she prayed for his soul, but not for long, for she had much on her mind.

She thought, "I must stop this, if there be yet time, and for that I must know where Sithric may be met. There is a weak link in the chain, which Thorkeld showed, and it is there he will strike. This I must think out, which is hard, for I am not wise in war."

Yet she knew that it must be done.

She thought long, and of many ways, of sea and river and land, but she saw nought except that her mind would come back to one point, and at last she rose up, for she had much to order ere Cynfrid came.

As to where Sithric would be she thought no more, for her mind was sure. It was Dee-mouth, which Hacco held for the Queen. For he was not Saxon-born and could be bought, or might change faith from fear, and the men that had been set to people the Dee valley were largely of northern birth, and would go lightly to the winning side.

Also, it was the nearest point at which the Irish Danes could land, whom Sithric would surely call to his aid, and the Northmen, coming down from Stromness by the western isles, which was their more frequent way, would find it a nearer port than to go round to Severn mouth, and their long-ships could come up to the bridge — to the very walls of the town.

There was also to be thought that the King of North Wales lay on the valley-flank, and was an unsure friend, who might be a ready foe. He would not make alliance with the foes of the Holy Church, being Christian, but Sithric was now of the same faith, and the Britons could join his part without shame.

There was more than this. It was a short march from Northumbria to the Dee-mouth. There was nowhere else where Sithric could strike so quickly and so hard, being remote from Ethelfleda's army in the Five Towns, and at the furthest point of all from the Wessex king.

Also, he would cut Reged off by that march, and it would be easy prey, for it would be weakly held while the Mercian army was in the field.

. . . So when Cynfrid came she had her plans made, and she said, "I must ride north in three hours from now, which you must tell to none. But you must get me the best horse that the town holds."

Cynfrid said, "Doth the Queen know ?" For he was much troubled in mind.

"There is none that knoweth. Yet if the Queen knew she might say that I do right, though she might hold me back. That I cannot say. But I ride to stop a new war, if I be not too late, and that is a good thing."

"It may well be," he replied. "Yet is it not fit that you should ride alone in such ways."

"I will take no woman on such a road, lest she fall into evil hands."

Cynfrid thought, and said, "Lady, I will come, if I may."

Elfwin was glad, though it was a thing which she would not have asked, for he was her mother's man.

She said, "It is a dangered way. You may never see Worcester more . . . And you may have the Queen's wrath if she think I have done wrong. I know not where it may end."

But he still said that he would go, for he felt that he would be doing her mother's will, being loyal to both. So she said at last that he should get two horses, and such gear as they might need, not being of weight, and that he should find her, when the time came, in the great church of Worcester. For she knew that it was a hard road that she must take, of which she saw not the

end, and that it might well bring scorn to her name in the mouths of men, wherefore she would pray long that God might lift the curse under which she lay.

. . . The King's guards came up the road that ran by the Severn bank. They wore quilted coats of a blue cloth and carried shields and the long Frankish lance, which was little used in the Saxon lands, and they bore the Wessex dragon embroidered in silver thread on their right arms, at which there were men that scowled.

They came by the great church and rode up to the Queen's hall which stood on the higher ground. They closed all the outlets at every side, and the captain asked leave to speak with the Lady Elfwin, but she could not be found. It was learnt at last that she had ridden out by the northern gate an hour before — or so it was said by one who would have it that she had been garbed like a fish-girl of the river-quay. For at that time the Severn ran bright and clear for all its length, and there was good fishing, even when the salmon season was past, and there were many who made living by selling fish in the towns.

CHAPTER IV

Hacco was a worried man. When he played with both sides, he had slept well. Now he had chosen his part, he must rise early to pace the wall, looking out to Deemouth where the long-ships lay, and south from where

the dragon-banner of Wessex might come up with any dawn, and west to the Watling Street, by which he knew well that Ethelfleda must be coming from the Danelaw lands, and the northern way by which Sithric should come with his Deirian army, on the first arrival of which his safety hung.

For Hacco's trouble was this. He had promised Sithric that he would throw open the town when he appeared with his army beneath its walls, but without that he would do nothing at all.

This was a secret word. There was no writing at all. It was a safe pledge such as may be made by a prudent man. But Sithric was not here, and the arrival of the viking fleet had forced him to show his hand, so that if the Saxons came he must stand a siege with such men as he had (which were well enough) and such food as he could collect in haste, for it was a month before harvest, and stores were low.

He took what comfort he could from the strength of the Roman walls, and the fact that Ethelfleda's energy, when she rebuilt the city, had continued these walls to the river bank, so that they had Dee water to drink, and could take in stores from the sea so long as these walls were held, and the viking fleet had control of the river-mouth.

It had not been Sithric's plan that the viking fleet should arrive first. He had planned well in the slow days when he had waited for his answer from Winchester, and had half-hoped that it might be such as

would lead to war. For it is hard to wait and to stay still. Thorkeld would sail with his three ships (not those that were building now) to Stromness, and gather his ready friends, and appear at Dee-mouth just as his own army marched into Chester. The Irish Gaidhil were to arrive at the same time.

The war was to commence with Chester lost, the foes of Mercia joined from east to west, and Reged cut off, with its summer crops to take.

It was a good plan, and even while Sithric wrote to Elfwin the letter of which we know, Thorkeld rode for the Tyne, where his ships lay.

North or south, he must go far round the land, and north was the better way. He was not one to delay. He would not be late. But winds are unsure to foretell, even on summer seas. He might be storm-held, or come only at the oars' pace, if headwinds hindered. He left space for such chances as these. But, in fact, the winds were good, the sea calm, his Orkney friends await. He entered the Dee with a great fleet six days before Sithric would be there, though he kept tryst to an hour.

Thorkeld saw no harm in that. There was yet no danger to fear. His men would come ashore, and stretch legs from the cramping of the galley-bench.

So he said to Hacco, who was not willing to hear.

Hacco said, "No, but you must stand out to sea. It must be talked that I beat you off. Else there will be news to the Queen, and she will be warned too soon."

Thorkeld said, "Am I babe? Doth Sithric come through the hills, and it be unknown in Tamworth tower? The Queen will be moving now. She needs no telling more.

"My men tire of the long-ships' holds. They lie too close in the heat. They must pluck grass.

"Nay, you must be friend or foe. I tie up at the quay."

Thorkeld's mind was at ease. Even though Wessex or Mercia should appear at the gates before Sithric's army should be there, yet the town must be held. They must stand siege. He could give good help.

After his talk with Hacco he was the more glad, for he read the man.

Two days later there came in a great fleet from the Irish land. It lay up in Mersey-mouth, lest there should be strife with the Northmen of Thorkeld's fleet, for when so many meet there must be old feuds that will be brought to a new head, and men are best apart.

It was a force already strong enough to have done much in a swift raid, but they had higher aim.

When would Sithric come?

CHAPTER V

Sithric had lost no time. He was true to his day when he came out of the hills, and made camp at the old Roman fortress of Manicunium, which stands where the York road comes down from the Pennine pass.

Had it stood as it should, garrisoned, and with well-gated walls, he had been stayed at this point, but all men knew how it lay.

Five years later Edward would build it anew, as he did Bakewell also at that time, making them, with Derby, a strong line to hold back the North-Humber land, but now there was little that stood, beyond the great mound girdling a half-mile of weeds, growing rank in a rich soil, and there were some herdsmen's hovels built of the fallen stones, but not many of these, for men will not live in a walled place when the gates are down, which is to set trap for their own lives.

So Sithric camped on the site of a city which had been great when men throve, and the world was an ordered place. But that was five hundred years ago, and since then the wilderness had spread in the western lands as a lichen spreads on a wall.

Sithric was to his day, yet he came late, for "Ethelwulf's spawn" had learnt early of what stirred and had moved with speed.

It was the curse of the Saxon cause for a hundred years that men could only be called up for war if there were a threat near to their own roofs, and then only for two months, so that they would ever scatter from battle won, as men flee from a lost field, and so would never take the full fruit of that which their swords had earned.

But Alfred had done something to alter this with the fyrd levies, which still held, and, at this time, men were kept better together by the knowledge that they were

freeing the land, and the greatness of the success which had been won.

Ethelfleda lost no time. She left garrison for the Five Towns, and charged them to hold their gates well. She went up the Watling Street with every man that she could call. Those must follow who fell lame. She would stay for none. She would be first if she might.

She had heard that Elfwin was gone. She supposed that she was with Sithric now. It was a bitter thought. Yet it could not change that which she had to do. She thought to win York in the end. Then would be time to talk.

She marched hard, meaning to drive in between Sithric and Chester town, and give battle on Mersey plain. It was a good plan (so she thought to her death), but she had a letter from Edward who was of another mind.

He wrote, "South or west, let them come as far as they will, for should you cast them back to the hills, and they be not broken indeed, it is a long strife and doubtful that we must try. York is far. If we go there, it must be in all our strength, and foes may rouse in our rear. If we should lose battle, being so far, it might be to lose all. Let Sithric come south, if he will."

Edward may have been right. He was to be called the "Never-conquered King." Ethelfleda saw that should they go to York, whether soon or late, it must be with a lengthened rear. Roads were bad in the North-Humber hills. They would get little supplies.

They must live on the land, and it was a barren place. Even to take York might not be to end the war. There was Bernicia into which Sithric might retreat, where it would be harder to follow. Edward might be right. Anyway, they must be of one plan. She held to the Watling Street as it curved west, and waited junction with her brother's force.

If Edward were right (which some will think) it did not prove Sithric wrong. He had war to make of a kind which would not be won except he entered by his foe's door. Unless we see better plan than his, we must count it good.

As to Edward, he moved at a good pace, though he had been willing enough that Sithric should come as far as he would. Had he had his will, Sithric would have come south, but we know that he was not of that mind. Edward, hearing how things went, saw that he faced shrewd foes.

"It is this stake will test all," he said, when he knew surely where the battle must be, for he saw that it could not wait. To let the word pass through the world that Sithric had taken Chester, and Reged lost, would bring down all the North to the rescue of the Danelaw lands that were newly freed.

Two days after the news came there was not a Wessex man left in the East Anglian lands. Guthrum Ericsson might do as he would. He had sworn faith, and Edward would show no doubt. What he thought was that Guthrum would be too fearful to move till he

saw the issue of the Chester strife, and if that were lost, to think to hold East Anglia would be a vain dream. "If we lose there we lose all." So he said, and the dust rose on the summer roads as the whips cracked and the ox-teams strained and the Wessex levies went northward to the war.

CHAPTER VI

If Elfwin rode out of Worcester gate under curse either of God or man it seemed that it was one that did not delay to show her to what end she was like to ride.

They had not gone ten miles when Cynfrid's horse fell lame. They thought to find a stone in the shoe, but its feet were all heated and swelled, and they knew it for one of those that could not stand on a hard road, though they may go well enough for a time when they come off the grass land.

Cynfrid said that the man from whom he had it was a foul cheat, which may have been, but it mended nought. He must walk, and being in that pass, and having some fear of pursuit, though not such as they would have felt had they known all, they took to the woods, and let the horse go.

When night was near, having wandered somewhat from the straight way, they came on a little valley where folk made hay on the common land, and Cynfrid asked of the hayward, who was of a civil mien, if there were any lodging to be had for a Worcester man and his

daughter, who would go to take up work at the Dee fisheries.

The hayward, who knew little of fishing, and had never been to the Dee-mouth, did not question him on this statement, nor show surprise that anyone should be taking such a road at that time, for the news of the coming of the long-ships had not spread to that lonely place, but he warned them of the danger of the woods through which they must go, being infested by lawless men, who would strip them bare, at the best, if they should fall into their power.

As to lodging, he knew not what to say. It was one of those isolated valley settlements, which were common at that time, neither in bondage to old etheling, nor to new thane, having its own folk-bond and busy communal life, with smith and wright, woodward, hayward, and swineherd, each with his own traditional duties, and traditional rewards, but there was none whose lath-and-plaster walls included more than a room in which to eat, and to sit in the darker evenings, and another in which all would sleep, which seemed luxury enough to those whose work was in open air.

The smith was the best chance.

They found the smith to be a good-humoured man, held from the war by the lameness of an old wound. They could sleep by the forge and share what food there might be for a silver coin, and he would be well paid. There was a fenced paddock also, from which

the hay had been taken, where Elfwin's horse could graze during the night. They did well enough.

The smith was a good man. He looked with observant eyes at some of the contents of the saddle-bags which Cynfrid carried in to the forge, and unpacked for his daughter's use. He heard the words that passed from one to the other. He said nothing at all.

Only, when they started out in the early morning, he warned them, as the hayward had done, that they should have a care should they hear voices or see men in the woods, for, he said (giving them a specimen of his own wit), it is better to hide than to hang.

He looked at the short sword which Cynfrid wore, and put it on his grindstone to give it a better edge. It made no difference of which we know, and may have been worse than that, for the sword fell into bad hands, but it was kindly meant.

Elfwin took little heed of these things, for her thoughts were on that to which she went, and how she might yet bring it to a good end, in spite of all. Also, she loved the woods, in which she could not easily feel afraid. She went on that day as one who dreams, and slept so, for they lay that night in the open air, it being very warm, and Cynfrid having thought enough of the looks they drew from the hay-folk and the smith to make him slow to venture the like again, if there were a better way.

But if Elfwin slept in a dream, she waked wide, for it was but two hours from the summer dawn that there

was a cry from Cynfrid, who lay at the further side of a thicket's space, which was the last he would ever give, for he cried with an outlaw's knife in his heart, and when Elfwin, springing up among a little crowd of whom none stayed her at all, ran round to his aid, he was a dying man.

Elfwin looked round at the men, and they at her.

She was not dreaming now. She was cool, as she would ever be when a danger came, and she saw that she was in a desperate case for she knew well what they were.

It was not a time when men had leisure for the building of jails. Each man had the protection of his own folk-bond, and if he should be accused of wrongful slaying, or any violence or theft, it was to them that the accuser must go at the first, lest, should he be law to himself, he should face the wrath of all. For men must stand by one of their bond, unless there be good cause shown that he be unfit.

But should they look into the thing and find that he had wrought wrong, they might say to him that complained, "There shall be restitution to the scale that was settled of old," or "We will have no part in this. You may do what you will." And they must fight it out as they would.

But if more complaint came, or if he did evil among those of his own bond, they might cast him out, and he would be an outlawed man, whom any could slay that would. None was cast out so for a little thing, and

those that were, being driven from the kindly homes of their births and the common rights of men, must succour their own lives as best they might, and some would consort with such as had fallen in the same pit for other crimes, making common war upon those who (as they would think) had made first war upon them.

Elfwin saw seven of these men, variously clothed and armed, and of varied types, but all foul. They were not of good strength and heart, which was not a probable thing, but two or three of them were young and active enough, and one carried a bow. It would be folly to run.

Also, it would be folly to quarrel. She had no means of defence, except the little knife that was a table-tool.

One of them spoke to her now. He was the smallest of the seven, of about her own height, though, being a man, he looked less.

He had a cunning dissolute face, made hideous by the red spreading patch of some skin disease over one cheek.

He was puzzled by her appearance, which did not seem to him to conform to the dress she wore. He judged her to belong to a class of women who have existed in every age, and that she went loose in the woods, walking with whom she found.

Well, she would have done with Cynfrid now.

She did not understand what he said, but she remained still where she stood. What else could she do ? She looked at him without showing of fear, which came

of her race, but he thought it to mean that she would be willing enough to walk his way.

He must have had some power in the lawless gang, for he told them that she was his, but they could have Cynfrid's clothes, at which they stripped him who was scarce dead, leaving nothing at all, and quarrelling, with a show of knives, at a store of silver which his pouch held.

While they did this, their leader came closer to Elfwin. He spoke again, in a language which she could only partly follow, but she thought he made promise of gifts which should be hers.

Wishing to go in peace, if that might be, she tried what the truth might do, saying,

"You must let me pass. You do not know who I am. I am the Lady Elfwin. I am daughter to the Queen."

The man thought it a good jest. He leered reply.

He thought it most like that she came of a mumming troupe. One who had played queen's daughter, and would boast the part.

He gripped her shoulder, pulling her round with a hateful hand.

Then she saw clearly what must be, and she did not flinch at the thought.

She pushed him somewhat back, but without violence or wrath, saying, "We will talk when these others are gone;" which pleased him well enough.

The others were quick to go. They had divided the

coin, and may have known where it could be spent by such as they.

Soon there were two alone.

Elfwin said, "I think he is not dead yet," looking at the naked body of him who had been her servant and friend.

"Nay," said the man, "I make no error. I have done that thrust on too many before."

He bent over, to look.

"Have you that ?" she said. She made no mistake either, driving her knife into his back as he bent.

CHAPTER VII

Elfwin wiped her hand on the grass, where it showed blood. She was very white, and her mouth was set as though she had grown old in an hour's space.

She said to herself, "I thought never to do such as that. I am cursed indeed . . . Yet I have venged a friend's death, which is not so ill . . . Do I bring all men to death ? I shall be curse to many if I stop not this war."

She saw that she must go on, and it must be alone.

She looked at Cynfrid, who had been loyal friend. There had been a nest of ants near to where he had been stripped. Now they ran over his naked limbs.

She thought, "I will not leave him thus though the world fall." She thought again, "If I delay more, it

may mean many deaths. It is my curse that I must go on."

She thought, "Yet he may come to God's peace, though his body lie where it fell."

She said prayers.

She looked at him that her hand had slain. She prayed for him too, though with little will. As she prayed, a thought came.

She worked for an hour's space, and then longer at a near brook, for his clothes held lice.

After that, she stood up. She was man now, or, at least, boy.

The clothes were well enough, of a high cost when new, but now soiled. There was a hole in the back, and a dark stain, which she might not cleanse or mend. But his cloak had been cast aside, and she could wear that on the road.

They had not found her horse, which had wandered a short way, neither had they found the saddle-bags which Cynfrid had hidden before they slept.

It might have ended worse, as she saw, but she rode now with fear at heart, and little hope, though still of a steadfast will.

Yet there is a great peace in summer woods, which are of a quiet strength. They neither seek nor fear. They are of a confident life, taking rain and wind and the sun's light, and thanking God for all. Elfwin thought, "When men have slain the trees, there will be no such peace left in the world's girth, but that will not

be in my time. She thought of a scripture which was often said in Gloucester church, "The peace of God, which passeth the understanding of men." She had heard it from a child and ever thought, "That is the great peace of the trees, of which God is glad."

She found a path, straight and long, running in the way she would go. She made good speed, and came to a better heart, thinking that she made more pace than when they must walk. It might be God's way to her aid. Yet she liked not that it should have been by Cynfrid's death.

She remembered that her mother had taught, when she was young, that death was not much to dread.

In the peace of the great trees, she saw all things small, as they are.

She thought, "I am nought, and the lives of men are not much. Yet I must do what I may."

CHAPTER VIII

Sithric dressed in his tent. It was early hour, but there was much he would rule, for they would move through the Saxon lands.

His tent stood on a mown space, under shelter of the great mound of the Roman fort.

Seeing that ruined place, where the owls bred, he might have thought of how vain is the valiant deed, and all the strength and wisdom of men, for the Romans had been wise in peace and valiant in war. They

had struck deep roots. They had built firm and high. The world had crouched at their feet like a frightened dog. They had given kennel and food. Yet they had come to nought at the last, and the dog was a wolf that ran loose in a wildered land.

But Sithric thought not of these things. He played for a great stake, and he knew that he was matched by those who were not easily overthrown. They were older than he, and of long practice in war, to which he brought only the fear of his fathers' name, and the high courage of youth.

. . . One came to his tent saying, "Lord, there is a youth caught, who is urgent for speech with thee. He will not say who he is. Guthner thinks him a spy, and would make an end, for which I ask thy will."

Sithric said, "Of what race is he ? If he be Dane, bring him here."

"He will have that he is Mercian-born, but he is not of the Saxon kind. He hath Celt's eyes. It is most like he is cheat or spy."

"I have short time for talk. We must be hard with spies in our own lines. Tell Guthner I would hear no more. He may do as he will."

Sithric went forth to the sunny day to survey the breaking of camp, and roads which were crowded with moving wains or blocked where an axle broke, and a wide waste land on which a wild host of men were folding tents, or stamping out the fires that had been lit for the morning meal, or binding on the packs which

their own shoulders must bear till the day's march should be done.

With scouts far out, with a front of uncumbered men, and with strong parties having trenching tools, who could make mounded camps at speed if the need were, the great host, with a rear that straggled several miles behind, moved south, to cross the Mersey where it could be forded at an easy depth, and then westward along its left bank.

Sithric rode in the midst, with a following of prince and jarl, and an ever-coming of those who brought report, or would have orders anew, for he would know all. He would trust nothing that he did not heed. It was his first war, and the stake for which he played was one which never left his mind.

These things being so, it was near the noon before a camp-follower could gain his side, and win heed for a tale that he would tell, and at this time he had halted for a meal's space, so that he was in his tent, for the sun's heat was more than is often felt in the summer of those parts.

The man, being known, was able to pass the guard, and gain leave of speech, whereat he brought out a brooch which he gave to the King's hand, saying,

"Lord, this was given to me at dawn by one who said that you would think it a precious thing, and give much gold for its price."

Sithric looked at the brooch, and his heart stopped for he knew it well.

He looked at the man. "Where got you this ? Tell me all."

"Lord, it was from a caught spy. . . But I know nought of him. Only he said that you would give gold for the brooch."

The man drew backward the while he spoke, for he was frightened by the King's eyes, and he knew that they should stand near the door who bring ill news to a king.

Also, he knew that he had not told all, for the word had been that the King would give much gold if the brooch were in his hands in an hour's space, which it had not been, but as to that he had tried, and the fault was not his.

Into the heart of Sithric there came a very dreadful doubt, but he put it by, as a thing too fearful for thought.

He controlled his voice to ask, "Tell me more of this spy ? Was he young or old, and what manner of man ?" As he spoke he tried to think scorn of his first fear. A man is not a maid. At the worst, he had let be hanged one whom Elfwin had sent with this brooch to prove that he came from her. Well, if that were so it was an ill chance, which he would be loth to tell, but it was no more than the chance of war.

But then he saw the fear in the man's eyes, and with a sudden certainty he cried, "You should have brought me this at a shaft's speed ! It was for that you were to win gold."

At which word the man turned, and ran from the

tent, and at such speed that, though there was much pursuit, he made good escape, being lost among an army of men that had been scattered at ease, and were only now falling to the order by which they would move again.

Sithric cried, "Fetch me Guthner, in haste. Let him not flee too, or your lives pay."

Guthner was soon to find. He rode horse, ordering the ranks as they fell in, for this was his part.

They said, "The King is of a wild wrath, such as we have not seen. It is some tale of a spy. You must come in haste, or our lives pay."

Guthner turned to come. He was a thick-necked man, loud of voice to all. Not one quick to dream, or to fear.

But as he rode for the King's tent, he recalled something that had been said in the earlier day.

He had said to the youth, "You come north by the narrow way. You must tell that which you saw."

And the youth had answered, "I saw nothing to tell."

To which he said, "You can tell if the land be empty of men, or if there be signs of the Saxon host."

"I have nought to tell," the youth had answered again.

"Then you will hang where you stand, or at the next tree."

The youth had looked at him as with contempt. "Should you do that, the King would so deal that you would call hanging a god's boon."

He had thought little of that. It was the way of

spies, when they were caught. There was always, "I have word for the king's ear," or "I can show much in a certain place," or "I know where there is treasure hid," or "I have strong friend in the host."

It was done to hold off the rope. He was too old to give heed to such talk. Yet in this case he had been unsure. He had sent for the King's will . . . There was no comfort in that. A wroth king may be little stilled if he be told of his fault. There is little law but his will when the army moves.

Guthner asked, "Know you more of this? What hath chanced?"

They told what they had heard from the tent door, which had stood wide.

He remembered the words again, "You will call hanging a god's boon."

Suddenly he felt fear.

There was a clear by-path on his right hand, being the way through Reged to the wild hills beyond. It was the only chance he would have, and life is dear to all. He had a good horse, which would be hard to catch. The men of the King's guard were on foot.

He swung round, with a sharp spur. The horse plunged, and ran, throwing one to earth who would have caught at its rein.

There was outcry, "He must be stayed. It is the King's will." But who should do that?

There was one who did not waste speech. He had a bow, which he drew. The shaft struck between the

shoulders of a man who crouched forward on his horse's neck, and went on to the brain. He sank lower, without sound, and the horse trembled, and stood still, waiting for the coming of men.

. . . At the last they found one of Guthner's men, who knelt at the King's feet. He shook so that he could not speak, being one who would look at others' pain with an easeful mind, but had no heart for his own, and he knew what he had to tell.

The King strode in the tent as a tiger paces a cage.

He said, "Pull him up." He stood with his arms held on either side by the men of the King's guard.

Sithric caught up his axe. He said, "Speak, or die."

Then the man told all, and when he thought that the axe would fall, the King cast it aside. He said, "Go forth. I would be alone. Let none come till I call."

So they left him in the tent.

The army moved on, by the orders which he had given at dawn, as a fowl may move that has lost its head.

But the tent stood where it was.

CHAPTER IX

Bear Thorkeld said, "We shall not find him here. He would ride more in the van."

They had come to the place of the mid-day halt, but the army had gone ahead, where there was dust and noise, that a west wind brought back like a trailed flag.

They were in a place of strewn litter and trampled

fields, and among the scattered following that an army drags at its heel.

Only at one place there stood a square-sided tent, and around it were wagons, and a force of men who sat as those who wait, and they know not why.

Elfwin said, "We will ask there. They may tell us the way to take. It is a strange thing that they halt thus. There must be one who is ill . . . It would not be the King ?"

Thorkeld smiled as well as he might. "You think ever of one. If the King were ill, the force would not move thus, leaving him there."

. . . Thorkeld had come from Chester to see the King, having ridden through a summer night, which he chose from the day's heat, being one who could endure much cold, but who had no love of a high sun.

He missed Sithric by an hour, having forded Mersey stream at a lower point than that which had been chosen for the army to take, and come up the northern bank, which was the better way for one who rode.

Asking the way the King took, he came on a little group of men who looked round for a good tree on which a spy might be hanged, for it is well to leave such as they in the air where they can be seen, and will make others less bold.

Thorkeld did not look twice, for it was not his death, but when he heard the voice of the Lady Elfwin, which he did not forget, "Jarl Thorkeld, will you pass me thus ?" he turned in a quick wonder and saw who it

was who stood like a youth in a man's dress, for he was one who saw well, though he had but one eye.

"Lady," he said, "what do you here ?"

Elfwin laughed, who laughed seldom. She felt a relief which we can understand. She said, "I do little: I am done to."

She felt that she could have laughed more than she would, and held herself thereat in a strong check, for she loved not so to lose her control.

Thorkeld said, "I have no knife, but a sword will serve."

He cut the rope by which her arms had been tied, but they were of little use for a time, being too cut and numbed by the rope.

He said, "How came it to this ?"

"These men cannot understand any speech I know, or it had gone less far. I looked for relief, for I have sent Sithric that which he will know . . . Yet it went too near, and you came in a good time."

Thorkeld agreed to that. He spoke to the men in their own tongue, which he knew, as he knew most that were spoken in the north lands, and some others besides.

He said only, "You can go. This is my charge."

"Lord," said one, "will you clear us with Guthner, whose men we are ?"

They made no more protest than this, for they knew Bear Thorkeld, and that he would not so act without cause. All men knew Bear Thorkeld. It is a gain of having only one eye that you will be known of many.

There are others which we must leave, lest we be drawn from a dragging tale.

Thorkeld said, "I will hold you clear that you have done no more. I will not hold you clear for that which you have. That is for the King."

"Lord," they said, in one voice, "we did that which we were told, and no more."

"Then you should come clear."

He spoke no more to them. He said, "You will need horse."

Elfwin said, "That I do; yet I need food more."

Thorkeld could serve the last need, having meat and bread, but the horse was less easy to find. They had taken hers, with all else that she had. At the last a horse had been loosed from a wagon-team, which must pull the harder for that day, till it should be returned at the night halt, for which Thorkeld gave gold in pledge for its full worth, or, as he thought, more.

As they rode, Elfwin must tell of need how she came to ride in such garb, and of her ventures on the road, from which it came. They had stolen her cloak with the rest, so that the hole in the back of her doublet, with its dark stain, was witness of what had been. Of why she came, or for what end, she was less free of her words, till Thorkeld, thinking of the scene she told — of the man that stooped over him that he had slain, and the girl beside him in the lonely wood who drove in the knife with a firm hand — and being willing to draw her to further speech, said,

"York will have queen to its need."

"What mean you by that ?"

"I meant praise. You will be the queen that they need. For you must wed Sithric now, being here."

"It was for that I came."

"That is clear; and your coming will be great gain. It was well thought and done. I see Mercia fall. Or it will break loose from the Wessex bond, and you shall be queen indeed."

"That," Elfwin answered, "is no purpose of mine, nor would I let such thing be. My mother is Mercia's head, and my uncle her overlord. I came to stop the war."

"Then you come a month late. You cannot do that now."

"I wed not Sithric else."

"Then he must take you unwed. There is nought else to be done."

Thorkeld was amused.

Elfwin looked at him with some displeasure, and in a doubtful mood. Should she speak more ? She knew he had not liked her when they first met; that he had looked on her as a boy's folly, for which he risked crown and life, and one who, by the talk of men, would have been dear at a less price. She knew that he had soon changed from that, but there were still times when he thought her fool.

As for him, she liked him well, and she thought he might give counsel that Sithric would heed if she could win his help.

She decided to tell him all — of the letter which had been lost in the hills, and of how Sithric would have thought that she made no reply and was content for him to take her, as he had said, at the sword's point.

"As to which," she said at the last, "I would not bring new war on the land, though I were queen thereby to the world's ends. I would liever die."

Thorkeld was still amused. When she had done he said, "I was told that you were not of your mother's breed: that you are unlike your race."

"That may be a true word. It is often said. I am black, and there is none other black as I, nor has been so since the King Ethelwulf from whom we come. What of that ?"

"But I do not say it at all. It was said to me. It may be that I have but one eye. I cannot tell you apart."

After that he said no more for a time, for he would laugh to himself at his own thoughts, as he often did.

Elfwin took this as well as a girl might and was not quick to speak again, but she would know what his thoughts were for she would have his aid if that might be won, so she said at last, "I know not why you jape, or say you cannot see that which is known to all. My mother is a great queen. She is tireless in rule. She is just and strong. She is known in war. I have heard it said that there is none living who might not take counsel with her for a battle's plan, or the feints by which it is forced where a fight shall be. This is not a child's boast. I might say more and not all . . . As for

me, I have no liking for rule or war. Nor do I read the saints' lives in the night hours . . . I have lain all day on a stream's bank that I may learn how the fish live . . . Would my mother do that ? She would say, 'What is caught ? You could have filled a creel in the time.' So I might. I can catch fish in my hands, which my mother would never do. . . I like to be in the woods. I can watch God's ways, and the hours are long, but not slow. I would be in the woods at night. It is best then. Would my mother that ? She would say, 'You should sleep at night. What is a bed for ?' . . . I am no help to my mother's house. It seems that I may be curse. I am not of her kind. If she dream today, tomorrow it is no dream, but a deed done. But I would dream, and let the world go by."

"So you say," Thorkeld answered, "and all this I have heard, but so I have not seen. Did you nought when you let Sithric free ? Do you nought, coming here through the wild land ?"

"But that is not of myself. I seek him I would have, and it is a great stake. When it is won (if won it will ever be, of which I am in a great fear), then I shall be as I was. I am no queen for this land, and if you think so, you err. Do you still call us alike ?"

"That I do," Thorkeld answered, "I cannot tell you apart."

Elfwin's voice was cold as she answered, "I will say no more. I give you my heart and I think you mock."

Thorkeld said to this, "It would be shame if I did.

But I spoke that which I mean. If you will take it well I will show that it is no jape."

Elfwin said, "If you speak your heart's thought, you may do that without fear, as a friend may."

"When I was caught in the Derby trap, in a strife which was not mine, I spoke with the Queen, your mother, and she showed me much of her mind. She told how she had planned that you should wed the Wessex prince, from your cradle days, and from that cause she would bear no more lest it should bring strife to the land. I said to her, "You must have thought you were God." For she is a wise queen, but she thought to be wiser than a man may. And now look how it hath chanced. Had she borne sons, as she should, there had been heir to the Mercian rule, and you could have wed whom you chose. You would have done well, making friends to the far north, and all men would have praised your name."

Elfwin said, "All this may be, yet I see not that it shows that I am of my mother's kind."

"That is soon to come . . . You ride here at a great risk, and in ways which may bring shame which you cannot shun. You wear a man's tunic, which has a dagger-hole in the back, which yourself have made. This is what comes of your mother's plans, when the seed forms and the petals fall. Do you learn aught ? Not you. You will be God again. You will stop the war. You will — "

He paused for a second's space, perhaps not being

over-clear as to what she had purposed to do, and she took up the word.

"I will do no more than is the way of all. I seek that which is to me of most price, and to come to it by a clean path."

"Would you no more than that? Nay, you would be God. You would be more than He. You would drive the world on a tight rein, which He doth not do. For you may think of this. Your mother's plan was not good, as you can see well, yet He let it be. He will let men go their own ways for a time that He may see what they will do. Now I could show you two things which you do not see; but do I tire you with words?"

Elfwin said, "You do not tire me at all. I may speak more shortly than you, for I was never one to say much, but you speak of that on which I stake all, and I would heed, though I may go on with the same will as before."

Thorkeld said, "You have words enough at your own time. But I would show you two things which it seems that you do not see, and the first is this. You have caused no war, being less God than you think. There are two hundred long-ships that lie now in Mersey-mouth and in Dee. Would they come for your call? If you were to ask every man who is not slave why he hath come, he would say first, 'For it was my captain's will.' But if you should ask him again, and he should think and then say, it would be, 'For I was born in a cold land and bare, which hath many sons and few fields. We come to a rich land where there are still

woods to fell, and new soil for the plough to break, and we must fight first, for there are men here who would close our way.'

"And the next thing is this. You cannot stay war, till you stay life. There is no weed but makes war from the seed's fall, till it come to its own end. Men must strive, that the best come to the head. Men must die, that there be room for the young. That is life's law which you cannot change. It is your part to give birth. You cannot stay death, but there is that you can do. Why do women have wombs to bear ? Yet you say, 'I will wed none, save I stop this war, and there be peace in the land.' You would be God indeed."

Elfwin said to this, "You would make me fool as you talk, and of a great pride. Yet you see not all. It may be that there is that which you do not see, being not of my faith. Yet I may ask this. Is it so well that we bear sons, if it be but to bring death to the world, and the more sons we have the more war, with the woes it brings ? We have known war in our land for a hundred years, and it is a bitter dole."

Thorkeld said, "It is fairly asked, though it has that in its heart which you should ask of God, not of us. But as to the faith you hold, I will say this, which I said to Sithric before, on the night that we came free by your aid from Derby tower, and he had told me that you would have him to change his faith, and that it was to your gods he must kneel. I said then, 'You need not haggle at that, for it is a great faith, and I have watched

that it spreads wide. It hath mumming ways, yet it hath a great light within, which themselves hide. It is clouded star.'

"But as for war, you say well that it is dole though that is not all. I am viking born, yet I love not war, and there are times when I stand aside. I asked of your mother, 'When did I raid this land?' and she turned it aslant, for it was a thing which she could not say.

"Yet if I were asked at last if I had found life good, it is of one thing I would think, of one thing which I will not tell, lest it seem that I boast too high.

"But if you say, 'Let us have fewer sons and less war,' then it is vain talk, and would mean no more than that your sons would go down to death by a bitter gate. For there will ever be the strong race which will make thralls of the weak if they do not slay."

"It may all be," she said again, "for you are wise, and have watched life. Yet all you say must leave this, that Sithric hath waked this war now that he may have me to wife at the sword's point, and it is for that cause I come to say, 'You must stop this war, and we will be wed in York church on the day you will, but if you do not so, I will wed you never at all, for I will be no prize of a ruined land.' "

"So you have said," the viking answered. "But there are two things that you will not see, of which the first is that you come too late; and the second is that having come, you have no choice but to wed.

"You think this war hath not yet come to its birth, though men have gathered from far, because there hath been no blood let, but it may be half done while we ride here. War is not played only with lives of men. You should know more of your mother's ways, and of your uncle, the Wessex king. And of our part, it is wile for wile, and we think not to lose at the first throw.

"For where fools fight, it is the straight march. It is front to front. It is large slaying of men. At the last, they are both worn; there may be little done.

"Now in this there is a slant march, and there is Reged cut off, and Chester seized, and there has been no fighting at all . . . And your mother wars in the same way. She was soon enough. She might have been in the Mersey vale. But she holds back, lengthening her front on our flank as we march. She hath her own plan."

"How know you that ? It was that which I would not tell."

"Then it was not worth a neck's risk. Sithric knows it well. It may not be known to all in the host, but he hath sure news. It is all known to an hour. We know where she camps and with what force and by what roads she brings up her rearward men. We know too by what roads and in what strength King Edward comes from the south, for he must join in this war. For if you look deep it is not York that fights with your land, it is Edward and we that fight that his overlordship may be broken or made more firm than before.

Your mother may care nought, for she and he are good friends, and are close kin. But if you would be queen of a free land, there is but one way.

"You say that you would not tell that you had seen, but you must choose side at the last, and you leave it late. Would you stand with one foot on shore and one on deck when the hawsers are cast aside and the ship is poled from the quay ? It were to fall far."

"Jarl," Elfwin replied, "you say much; but that which I say you will not hear. I come not to take side in a war, but to stay it by all the means that I may. If I speak my thought, it is that I would have my uncle overlord of the whole land, for it is the way of peace. I know that Sithric hath offered this, and was refused, and in that my uncle was wrong.

"I do not blame Sithric at all. I will wed him in York, and my uncle must face a fact which it is too late to change. It is for that I am here. Only, I will have no war, for which there would be no cause left."

"And I say again," the Jarl replied, "that you come too late. You cannot stay the war now, and you must needs wed . . .

"As to that, Sithric should know how to deal. You are of stubborn will, but you are of less strength than he.

"Should he force you once (which is that which you need), you would be glad at heart, though you would be wroth of word, for that is a woman's way.

"It would be but a few kicks, or your teeth in his

hand, and you would get that for which you came; and after that you would be no trouble at all. You would be meek to wed. You would bear babes, as a woman should, and leave talk of a war which you cannot mend."

Elfwin was not wroth at these words. She looked at Thorkeld with amused eyes.

"You do err much. I think now that you do not know me at all."

"That would wait the proof. But there is that in which women are of one mind, let them say else as they will."

"Yet I say you do err, and the proof would be bitter dole, of a life's length. Yet am I not feared. You may be wise, but there is one thing that you have not thought. Sithric doth love me well."

Thorkeld thought of this and he was silenced at last, for he saw that she was wiser than he.

CHAPTER X

It was with such talk that the hours passed, and that they came at length (as we have seen) to the place where the King's tent stood.

Thorkeld spoke to Ungar (whom he knew) who was the captain of the King's guard.

He said, "I would know why you lag here while the army moves, which is a strange thing to see. That you may tell or not as you will; but of your courtesy I

ask by what path we may seek the King, for I would see him in haste."

Ungar said, "I can answer both in the same word. We lag here at the King's will, for he bideth within the tent, and will have speech with none."

"That is hard to bear, while his army moves to the war. There must be more to tell."

"There is something, but not much. There was a spy hanged at the dawn, and when he was told of this, it may be an hour back, he was like a man wild. Had it been his blood-brother (which he hath none), it would have seemed beyond sense. I trust he is not mad, for we have had three kings in York in the five years past, and he is best of the three."

Thorkeld said, "I can mend this. I will go in."

"That is more than I dare. Guthner fled his wrath and he lies dead in the next field. I have orders that none pass."

"But I can put things right, that he shall be wroth no more."

"That may be as it may. But I will break order for none. My neck is as dear as thine."

"I will be surety—" Thorkeld began, to one who would hear nought, and Elfwin spoke for the first time.

"I think it is I that will go."

Ungar stayed her with a pike's point. He said, "This is no jest. If you take but one more step, you have chosen your death."

Thorkeld said, "That were jest indeed. Man, I bring

him the hanged spy. Would you kill him anew ?"

Ungar said, "If you would be plain ?"

"Captain," Elfwin said, "you are good at guard, as Sithric — as the King — shall be told. I would not urge you to do that which you know wrong. I will be plain in all. I am the Lady Elfwin of Mercia, as Jarl Thorkeld knows, who have come in this guise to the King, whom I am like to wed, and he thinks that I have been hanged as a caught spy.

"That is all in short word, and if I go in, all will be well, and you shall march in an hour's time."

Ungar knew this was true as he heard, being a man well fit for the post he held. He said, "Lady, you may go in as you will. But I will take surety from none. What I do shall ever be on my own head."

He let the pike fall, and Elfwin entered the King's tent.

CHAPTER XI

As to what passed in the tent, there was none that saw, but it was in about half-an-hour's space that they came forth together.

Sithric greeted Thorkeld well. He said, "I am in great debt to your aid which I must pay as I can."

Thorkeld said, "It was nought but a good chance. The Lady Elfwin is not one for such fate. She would have found way."

Elfwin wore Sithric's cloak. She had thrown off

the soiled doublet, with its hole in the back, and the cloak must serve for all. That was well enough for the heat grew.

She looked ever at Sithric, as he at her, with eyes which would not withdraw. He was far taller than she. He had been tall before, but he had grown in weight and in girth. He looked king, as he was.

Thorkeld saw that they had that in their hearts which was too great to be hid. Elfwin's face had colour and light, and laughter would break her words.

They got to horse at a good speed. They rode after the host. There was no talk of ending the war.

Thorkeld rode somewhat behind. They should be to themselves now. Yet there came a time when they rode single on a narrow way, and as it closed at the first Thorkeld was at her side for a dozen yards.

He said, "So we ride not to York ?"

"Nay," she said, "it is to talk of tonight. We will have good day."

Thorkeld cared not what he said to any, nor she greatly to him. They were good friends in their own way.

He asked, "Was it not as I told — that you will be meek to wed ? You were long in the tent."

"Nay," she said, "I am virgin still — though it was a near chance when the doublet fell."

She pushed her horse first at the narrow place, as her right was, even as the words passed, that he had no time for reply. He did not see her again till they were

at halt for the night, when there was talk enough, in which all must join; for Elfwin would have her way and was loth to see that a war cannot be stayed as a horse is checked by the rein.

They were at a farm-steading that had been stoutly built. The house was large: it had barn and byre: it had a stockade and ditch, so that it could be held by its men against a small raid, unless they would lose lives for that which the byres held.

It should have been to burn at the morn, for that was the Danes' way, but Sithric's orders were clear that there should be no firing at all. They must live on the land, for that is the way of war. They would clear it of all that had not been driven off. They would tread crops. But they should not waste with fire, for they came (so he would have it said) as the friends of Mercia to free her from the Wessex yoke.

Mercia took no heed of such talk. They were Danes. The butcher said to the lamb, "I would do you no ill. I would be friends. Let us go together to pick mint." So it seemed to them, for they recalled how it had been when Burhred fled, and the Danes had set up Kelwulf to be their king.

The main hall of the steading was low-ceiled, but large.

Here had come vikings enough, with Halfgar of Man, and another Sithric, a Dublin king, who would be known at a later year as he who had but one eye. But as yet he could not match Thorkeld in this. Here were

all the chief men of the gathered host, for they would take counsel, now that Sithric had come, as to how he would order the war.

Only Hacco was not here. He said that he must keep guard of his own gates. He had heard the force with which Edward and his sister moved to the war. He knew them too well for his peace. He walked Chester walls biting his nails.

It was eight hours after noon, and the sun was down in the sky, when the council sat await for Sithric to come, and he was held in talk with Elfwin in an upper room. For she would have his word that the war should cease, and it was a thing hard to give, as she would not see.

So at the last there was a cold fury of words, and then,

"I will have back my ring."

Sithric thought of the brooch, for his mind was troubled. He said, "It is here for thee."

"I meant not that, but the ring."

"That," he said, "I will never give, but at one time of which you know. You are mine till the world fall."

He gave way so far that he said he would do all that he could.

He went down to take the high seat from which must be said that which they would be loth to hear.

CHAPTER XII

THERE had been sour words at the council board, and high words at times, before the light failed and there must be torches called, that they might see who spoke, and how his words were received.

They had thought Sithric mad. They had nigh called him coward. To prepare war is a thing of cost. It is all loss if we draw back at the first day. They had come at his call. He had planned all. Now the Lady Elfwin had joined his force. That was great gain. He had got his queen. Let him take his land. He could now march in her name. He could show her flag. What did her whims count? She could not go back. She had made her throw. If she did not like how the dice fell, what was it to them? Halfgar said she should be tamed with a hide whip.

Sithric did what he could for a weak cause, for, in truth, her reason was that she had no will that war should be made in her name upon her mother and her mother's land, and it was one which would not move them at all.

He could only urge that Elfwin was in his hands, whom he would have made war to take, as Edward to hold, and that he might now be disposed to make a good peace. Then he would thank the help they had given. He would pay their charges with a free hand. He would do the like for them if the need were.

Sithric of Dublin asked with a scowl, "Else will you go home? Will you play the rat?"

Halfgar said, "There is word that Guthrum Erricsson waits his time. He makes Colchester strong."

This brought to mind the evil case in which East Anglia and the Danelaw lay. For the most, they were pirates born; but they were Danes still.

They saw that if they drew back now it were end to the Danish grip on the Saxon land. They would draw back without change of blows after the boast they had made. It would be a talked shame that would live longer than they.

While they sat, there came such news as was little help.

We know that Ethelfleda would have fought this war in a way other than Edward chose.

She would have crossed Sithric's path so that he should have fought as he came down from the hills, when his friends were far. Then she would have turned on Hacco, and those who had come to Mersey and Dee-mouth, and with Edward's help she would have given them an ill time.

Edward had other plans. He would let Sithric come too far to go back. He would risk all for a great gain.

As to which plan were the better made, it is a thing that cannot be told, for to prove that they must have tried both, which could not be.

It was of the greatness of these two that they could always act as of one mind. So Ethelfleda gave way now, and kept back in the woods, moving on Sithric's flank.

Yet she was wroth and bitter of mood, for she had no peace at heart since Elfwin had fled to her country's

foes. She thought often that it had been well if Elfwin had not come to her birth. Hers had always been a hard life, a life of war and prayer, but never as it was now. It seemed she did not sleep at all, unless she slept on her knees. She seemed to have forgotten that she was bodily weak. It was as though she would never tire. She would order all. She knew her levies to the last ox, where they moved and lay. She was restless for the strife to close, as she had never been before. Only her promise to Edward held her back. It is to be said that it was Reged land which the Danes laid waste in her sight, and Reged was less Edward's than hers. Yet she had seen her land laid waste before this, and watched with a cool mind, like a patient cat, till the time came to spring.

Thorkeld had said that they knew to the hour every movement that her troops made. That was not far from truth. They had been but an hour wrong, but that hour had been hers.

She had struck with a sudden force at the left rear of the moving host of the Danes, where its baggage-carts had dragged somewhat in a heavy way, and had cut it off, with its rear-guard of three hundred men. There had been slaughter of these, and of such wagon-drivers and camp-followers as had no time to flee. There was little mercy in these wars. There had been swift pillage of all that an hour could take. Traces were quickly cut, and horse and ox were driven off from wagons that would not need them again, for the smoke

of their burning rose dense and black in the darkening eastern sky.

When rescue came, there was no more to be done than to deal with the wounded where they lay, and to pick up a scatter of fallen things. Ethelfleda's men were back in the woods, where it would have been folly to follow. You can do much in an hour, if it be well planned in the earlier day.

Well, this did not help talk of peace, nor make peace in Sithric's mind. It was his first war. He felt that all would think that it was his blame. Had he not stayed in his tent, had he not listened to a woman's voice all the later day, it need not have been.

In fact, they thought none of these things. It was no more than a mischance, such as will happen to all at times. They were old in war and they knew that you cannot always guard at all points. But you can hit back.

What would Sithric do now ?

He went so far that he told the Dublin king that he would have no separate peace; but he urged still that they should make approach, which the others were loth to do.

Halfgar said, "Let them come to us if they will. If they think the game is played, now that the Lady Elfwin is here, it should be said first by them."

To this all were agreed. As to Sithric standing by his friends, if it came to peace, well, most could go back overseas if they would, but what of Hacco ? Hacco had

a friend at the board, who was urgent on this. It was not easy to say.

In the end it was Thorkeld, who had spoken little till then, who put the case in a way which had the support of all, and to which Sithric could not refuse assent, for it was plain fact.

Halmer of Skye, a quiet man with cruel eyes, who pulled down hair of a foot's length from his upper lip as he spoke, said,

"Bear Thorkeld saith nought, yet it is he who hath brought us here. I had not come but for him. I was for Spain's coast, where I did well five years ago. We might have gone with a good wind."

Thorkeld said, "I would think first, for this is a great cause." He turned to Sithric. "I am friend, as I think you know. I have looked at all sides. We have strong foes and a hard fight if we win, and there are those here who will die. So I think. If we lose, we lose much, and you most, for we are for our ships, and we go home where they cannot come, but York cannot be moved. If you lose here you lose all. Yet I see not how this war can be stayed, except it be willed of all, and I will show you why."

He turned his one eye down the long table of those who had fallen silent, and leant forward to listen, for all knew that Thorkeld was wise in the art of war, though he practised it less than most.

He went on, "We are here like two strange dogs that stand face to face, and each may be coward at heart,

yet it dare not turn head, or take backward step lest the other spring. You ask, 'Will Sithric turn rat ?' but, if you think, you will see that it is a thing which he could not do.

"We could leave him here if we would, for we have Chester walls where we could make stand, and we have always the sea.

"But if he turn back now, he could never get again to his own land, *for he hath come too far.*

"The Queen could push in between. It is for that she lies as she doth. She would make stand on the hill-sides where she would be hard to pull down, and Edward would let us be, and fall on his rear.

"We are in this place of our own choice, that we can make no peace but of our foes' will.

"And if you take their view you may see that they are in a like pass. For though no battle hath been, we have Reged cut off, and Chester won, and the talk of these things will spread, and they could not leave it so if they would. For they have won much against the League of the Five Towns, and Guthrum is down, and if they look strong, it will turn the prows of our ships into other seas, but if it look that it is a tide which can be turned, then will all the North come down to the help of those of our kin that they have brought so low. It is so that neither they nor Sithric can turn aside, nor go home, except it be willed of all.

"You must fight" — he turned to Sithric again —"between Scargate and Chester walls, and if you lose, you

have no choice but the Welsh hills, or that we take you off by the sea."

Someone said, "Yet it was your own plan at the first, or so it was told. We thought to fight in a war which was of a good plan from the first."

Thorkeld answered to this, "It was a good plan for a war, and so it still is. But it is not one that we can stay when we will."

CHAPTER XIII

THE JARLS went at last, having spent time in a talk of peace, when they should have dealt with urgent questions of war. They went in an ill mood, having given way very little, and feeling that that was too much.

Elfwin came to the room where they had been, where there was only Sithric now, and Bear Thorkeld, who had stayed at his friend's word, for Sithric would have his witness of what had been.

Sithric said, "I would have you know that I have done all that I could. We must have faith, if we would love well."

"I would think that," Elfwin answered. "I am ever one to give faith where I love. Yet this is a great matter to me. How doth it now stand ?"

Thorkeld answered to this, "Lady, will you listen to me ? For you must know facts, if you would judge fair. Sithric hath fought hard for your will, and there is something won."

He would not say what this was till he had gone over all that had been said and explained the pass in which they stood, as he had done at the board. Then he said,

"They have agreed at last, though with an ill will, that you may write yourself to the Queen, asking in your own name if peace may be, but not in Sithric's or theirs, and if you get a good word they will hear more."

Elfwin did not know what to make of this. It claimed thought. It might be little or much. She said only, "You are a good friend. I will do what I may. If I had come more soon ! I think I am cursed of God, as my mother said . . . I must not rest till I write. I must have ink and pens. Can they be got in this place ?"

Sithric called for such to be found with speed. She would talk no more. She would go to her own room. She said, "You will be ready when it is writ ? You will not rest till I call ? It will go forward with speed ?"

Sithric promised this. She went up to her room to write.

CHAPTER XIV

Edward and Ethelfleda sat together, having much to say. They had met but an hour ago.

There came a house-carle to the Queen with a word of haste. There was one of whom she knew, who had that which was for her own hand.

She went out, and came back at once.

She said, "There is letter come . . . It is Sithric's seal." Her hand trembled as she broke it loose, which the King saw, and it showed him much, but she did not see it herself.

She read twice. Then she said, "It is Elfwin writes. You had better see."

He took the scroll. He did not think it could be a great thing. The board was set now, and the time for words was not yet.

He said, "It was done in haste. It was closed ere it was dry." Then he read.

He handed the letter back, saying only, "It is hard for you."

"What can we write ?" she asked, when it seemed that he would say no more.

"You must write what you will. If you ask what is best, I should send no answer at all."

After a time he said again, "It is hard for you." Then he talked of other things.

Later, he walked by himself. He was not a hard man, but he was one who put his duties first. Indeed, that is less than the fact. He put them first and last. He was sorry for his sister, with whom he had more sympathy and understanding than with any other that now lived. He had little joy in his own home. . . He was sorry for Elfwin also, but not much. She was a reckless fool. At the right time he would know how to deal with her. Ethelgiva would . . . But he supposed that she would

have married the Dane before then. Like Thorkeld, he did not see what else she could do. Well, what of that ? His half-brother, Ethelwold, had fetched Editha out of convent and married her, and when Ethelwold was dead he had put her back.

There was one thing in Elfwin's letter which would not leave his mind. That was, how it began. On the outside the style had been as it should, *To the Lady Ethelfleda of Mercia,* but Elfwin's own commencement had been *To the Queen Ethelfleda of Mercia, at her palace at Tamworth, or where she may first be found.*

He knew quite well that his sister was queen in the mouths of men. He did not mind. They were of an understanding too close for that. And he knew it to be a title which she did not seek or desire. But there was the menace to Wessex there. None could forget when Mercia had been first in the whole land.

Elfwin had meant nothing by it. It was how she always wrote. But he did not know that.

Ethelfleda's marriage-plan for the unity of the land had been good enough, yet, as it had failed, there might be a better. So he thought.

Anyway, he hoped she would not answer the letter. It was best to leave them in doubt. That would be all to his gain. It is not the spirit in which war is successfully waged. Let them keep one eye on the likelihood of a near peace. He muttered, with the slight smile which would mean ill for those of whom he thought at the time, "Let her keep them in doubt. She

is twice fool who cannot choose her side. She will bring us a full net."

He had another thought. He had walked slowly up and down the yew-path of the house in which they were lodged, looking a weary and ageing man, though he was not yet of fifty years. But at this thought he turned in at a brisk pace, which was the common end of such reveries. He had come to something which could be put in action, and he was alert at once. Edward lost no time.

It was but a few minutes from then that a letter was on its way to Hacco of Chester by a sure and secret hand.

. . . Ethelfleda went to her own chamber. She knelt before the shrine which it held. She would read the letter again.

Mother [she read] *you must think as you will, for I count our love but a lost thing. Yet I have done that which I could, at a great risk, that the war might be stayed.*

I will say first that I blame Sithric not at all, for it is, as I think, of my uncle's fault, now I have heard all. But it is not of that I would write.

I have done all that I can to find a way of peace, and I have told Sithric that while the war lasts I will not wed, lest that my name be used against you and my own land.

There is none here that would have peace, having

gathered for war, yet at last it is brought to this, that I may write as I will, and that if I have fair answer from you it shall be fairly met on this side.

I think yet that I can so work that you can have peace if you will. If you would this you should write in haste, lest the battle join.

Sithric and I want not the land. Athelstan can have that, or whom you will. We will be at York, and you can forget my birth. My uncle can be overlord of the North-Humber land, as hath been proffered before. What more can be said?

There is no more I can do except (as I sometimes think) you would have me dead.

Of this letter Ethelfleda thought long, and at one time she wept, though she was not free of tears, for her mind was on such things as it was best not to recall. In her thought she gave way much and more than she knew.

She was of Edward's mind that there could be no peace made under Chester walls. It must be such a peace as no Danes would grant while they had not lost in the field, as Elfwin should have seen if she had been more wise in the things of state of which she had ever been slow to learn or to heed.

Nor did she think it well that Elfwin should be in York, wife of a Danish king, and mother (as it might be) of a Danish babe, though Edward might be overlord of the whole land. It was to plant that which

would bear seeds of war as surely as an oak bears acorns. Would Sithric take Athelstan for his overlord when Edward should be dead? Would there be never difference break out, and the old feud recalled? Would not Sithric say, "Mercia was first of old, and my queen is its rightful heir"? Or if Sithric kept faith, would his son do the like? None could say. But the record of the kings of York for a hundred years (and of Wessex, too, if you will) made it an unlikely thing.

Yet, when the war were won, if Elfwin were found to be wed to the Danish king, it was a fact which must be faced, and they must make the best they might of an ill thing.

She did not forget to count with a clear mind that kings may be killed in war.

She saw well enough why Edward would have no answer sent, and she was as willing as he that there should be doubt in the Danish camp, yet, being woman, she was loth not to send word of any sort, and (it is due to say) she did write reply, more than once, but held back that which said less (or it might be more) than she would, and, very quickly, the time for any letter was gone. She could not know that while she lived Elfwin would never read letter from her again.

Other thoughts crowded her mind. She had just heard that there was secret talk among the Danes in Derby that Guthrum Erricsson strengthened Colchester, which he had no orders from Edward to do, and this she must tell the King.

CHAPTER XV

Elfwin leaned on Chester wall, and looked out over Dee-mouth.

It was early day, but she had never been of those who sleep to the set hour, and she was vexed by a great unrest, and looking for a letter which did not come, while she watched the movement of a war which she could not stay.

She had lodging now in the new tower which her mother built, and dressed as a queen's daughter should. She was honoured of all. She was free to walk as she would. Sithric sat at her feet in all men's sight.

Yet her thoughts were dark, and she knew not that which she would.

. . . It was yester-eve that she had seen something that had given her thought. It was a face that she knew as that of one of her mother's men: one she had known as a child. What did he here ? He was a sure spy.

It was more than that. She had seen that he was in close talk with Hacco, and that twice. It would have meant little to one who did not know who the man was, but to her, and with the glances which she had seen them change, it meant one thing. Hacco was betraying again.

Should she tell Sithric of this ? Could she be silent, thinking that there was plot by which he would fall? Could she betray one of her own land to the hangman's rope ?

Must she be false to all ?

White nails cut into a bloodless palm, as her hand clenched in fury at the snare to which she had fallen.

Sithric came to her side. He sought her at every time that he might, saying no more of when they should wed, but talking of other things, trying to lighten her mood in his own way. He made no reproach, nor did he ever ask of the letter which did not come. Yet she knew it was in his mind, as in hers, and that she did him little good, in that she walked apart, and would not have her name used for the heartening of the host.

Now she said, "I have that to say which you should heed. Hacco should hang."

"I know it well. But why say you that today ? It is too little, or else too much."

"What I have to say has been said."

She would say no more, urge as he might. The honour on which she walked was a narrow plank, and it was not firm to the feet.

It was to change his thought that she asked, "How goes the war ?"

He was glad that he might talk of that which was ever in his mind, and of which he could seldom speak.

He said, "Not so ill. They gather force to a head. They must be now at their full strength. It may be for that they have held back, or it may be that they have hoped that we should move out by the Scargate road. That was our first plan, as they may have learnt, for there are spies on all sides. How can it be helped ?"

How, indeed ? They looked down on Dee bridge. Half-clad Britons on shag-maned ponies, or driving herds of sheep, and ill-fed oxen (small and black, walking now with drooping heads from a long road) crowded the narrow way, and jostled with soldiers and seamen and camp-followers of a score of nations, and a dozen tongues. There was not the order here, nor the discipline that had made the Great Army feared. Sithric knew that he did not command such a force as had once made the Great Army a name of terror through the Christian lands. It had moved from place to place, and from land to land, having no home but the high-mounded camp it would build in a fertile country, on which it would feed till it had cleaned it bare, or till its fancy changed, when it would migrate to be a plague to another place, or to blackmail kings for the gold which was the price of its passing on.

That army had been one of brigands if you will, of pirates by land and sea, but it had been disciplined, trained, and armed in the best science of war. It had been disintegrated at last by its own success. It had settled on conquered lands till it had made homes and taken wives, and the unrooted freedom from which had come its terror and its strength was a lost thing.

But Sithric's army, though of a wild and formidable virility, was largely recruited from a land which had been in an undisciplined chaos for a hundred years. It was allied with a horde of viking bands from Denmark, Scandinavia, Scotland, Orkney, Iceland, the Hebrides,

and more stable and disciplined elements from the Irish settlements; and augmented from the mixed population of the Dee valley.

It was an army in which, however skilfully it might be ordered, however firmly ruled, the work of the spy must be easy, and there could be little doubt that the plan of campaign, which was to have added Ethelfleda's new fortress of Scargate (Shrewsbury, as we call it now) to the gains of Reged and Chester, had been known to Edward and to Ethelfleda almost as soon as it was adopted by Sithric and the mixed council which he must consult and persuade to any plan on which he might resolve.

But that plan had gone. Had it succeeded, it might have won the country to the Severn bank, and induced the King of North Wales to join the war on the Danish side. The news of its success would have fired a quick flame of revolt in East Angelia and the Five Towns. It was a bold plan, but if there were any moment when it might have gained its end, that moment passed during the first forty-eight hours after Elfwin's letter was sent. The Danish army should have moved on, passing Chester without a pause, with its right flank on the Welsh border, and then pivoted round, so that it would have been on the flank of Edward's advancing army, with its base on the British hills.

In this position, with Chester in Danish hands, a success might have been snatched which would have turned the scale of the war, but the moment passed, and the

news which every hour brought in of the growing strength of the Wessex host caused it to be abandoned for the sounder if less picturesque alternative of entrenching beneath the Chester walls, and waiting for the attack of the Mercian and Saxon armies.

Elfwin said, "I suppose there are ever spies. But you are strong here, behind fence and ditch, and with the sea to bring supplies at your need. Why should they attack at all? Why should they not wait, saying that you must come out at last, and fight in the open plain?"

"Because," he answered, "we can wait better than they. They cannot let it be said that Chester is lost, and that they are held here with all their arms, and do nothing to win it back. We have seen that from the first, as have they, or they had not come with an army of greater force than hath been in one place since the great battle at Tettenhall, that was nigh twenty years ago."

Elfwin said, "That was the year I was born, or the summer thereafter. I was not a year old when my mother gathered army for that fight. She hath often told of the misery of the Mercian land till it was saved on that day."

They fell silent at that. It was hard to talk of that battle with free words from either. It has been the greatest disaster to Danish arms in the English land in the times of any that then lived; and then as now it had been Wessex and Mercia — Edward and Ethelfleda — with their two armies as one, who had united to break the Danes.

Sithric spoke of other things. Halfgar of Man had gone back to his own place. He had slipped off with his ships in the night. He had been ill to please since that first council, when Sithric had talked of peace. But against this there had been viking ships coming in, and some new troops from Ireland; and Bernician levies were on the way who would help to hold the Reged line, making their base on the Pennine hills.

And Elfwin felt that here was war in which race fought with race, and faith with faith, in which she was no more than a forgotten pawn, and the hope that there would be any word of peace grew colder even than it had been before.

So that she was of poor cheer when she spoke to Thorkeld in the later day, and when he asked her why she would not be content, she answered,

"How can I rest content, having done nothing of that for which I came? I had better have stayed in Worcester walls, and let the war go as it would."

And Thorkeld's face twitched as it would when he would have laughed if he might.

"Have you done nought? You have done all. You have been our death."

"That is foolish to say. I have been death to none. I wished not to bring any to death, but only that the war might be stayed."

"Yet it is what you have done; which, as ever, you will not see.

"If you came at all you should have sat high on a lifted shield.

"You are draught of death to this host."

"Then have I done that for which I came in part, though not all, and that not in the way that I would."

"Is it pleasure to think that you have so worked that your lover may be put to shame, and your friends down ?"

"Nay, I have no pleasure at all. I am cursed of God, as my mother said. I have choice of woe."

"I would not say you are cursed. Our thoughts are smaller than God. Yet you would be God Himself, in your mother's way, and He may will that you learn that He will keep His throne to Himself.

"I will tell you that which has come of a long thought. If we say, 'I will change the fate of the world,' as your mother did when she bore not babes that she might, I think we do change it indeed, though it is a great thing, but it will never change to our own thought, but to some new growth, which may be evil or good, but will not be as our dream was. Your mother thought much, she gave up her own life that she might be fate to this realm, and her thought was not barren, for it is through it that we are here today as we are. Yet she thought not this end."

Elfwin said, "That is true. Yet it is other with me, for I would save my land, though it were at my soul's price, and that you say that I do."

"Nay, I said less than that, and it may be, more. Have

we seen the end ? . . . You will look back at last, and say, 'I had hopes and fears, and I thought of many things which might be, but I thought not this.'

"I am one who will sail strange seas, and that is all I have found. There is ever an unthought thing. . . . It is of Valhalla we dream, or of your Heaven (which would be a strange place in which to dwell long), but at the last we shall come to a thing which we have not thought, and we shall say, 'Is it thus ? So we might have thought, but we never did.' "

As he spoke his eyes were far out on the distant sea.

He said, "See you nought ?"

Elfwin's eyes were good. She looked down on the river-quay, and the crowded river-channel, which was not as it is today (for this was a thousand years ago, and ten beyond that), and out at the further sea, but she saw nought.

He said, "It is there," with a pointing hand, and she looked long and said,

"There is but a fishing-boat that comes in with its catch from the herring-shoals of the British coast."

Thorkeld looked for a time without answer to this. Then he said,

"Thunder of Thor ! While we change dreams here. . . . It is joy to be in this war. Your uncle is a great king."

Then he was down the stair and away.

She could not tell what he meant.

CHAPTER XVI

There came in a small boat from the west. It was one of those that went out nightly to fish, for there were good prices to take on Chester quay, and you might come in with the gun-whale awash, and you could not bring too much for a swift sale.

But this boat had a bare well. It had cast its catch back to the sea, and it had out its four oars, though the wind was fair and strong. It came at a great pace, and as it hauled somewhat to run in at the river-mouth, and to pass the outmost ship of the fleet, which had just come from the Irish coast, there was a shouting of men, whose voices carried far with the wind. There were words lost, or in doubt, but "It is Saxon fleet," — that came clear.

It was seen from the shore that there was instant bustle on the Irish ship. They were hauling anchor at once. The mainsail rose to the yard. It must be tidings of weight.

Was it Saxon fleet indeed? How could that be? Edward had ships, as all knew, but they must guard his land. They held Thames. They warded all Wessex coast. They held Severn mouth. They could not come here, or not more than could be sunk by the viking fleet.

Yet here they had come. There were eighty war-ships in all, and a crowd of merchant vessels, wallowing in a safe rear.

Now there were trumpets in the town, and through the Danish camp, and a hurrying of startled men to the quay-side, and to the low shore where there had been beaching of many ships, for none had thought of the chance of an attack from the sea. They were too strong. The whole of Edward's fleet did not equal the number of the long-ships that had gathered to this war, and he had rich ports to guard, and a long coast at the south.

Yet so it was. He had left port and coast to any foe that might come, and every ship was here.

The wind came from the west. The viking's fleet must out oars if it were to win clear of the river-mouth at a good speed, and fight on an open sea.

There was much to be done in haste, if all were to be fit for sea, and furnished for fight. There was call for help to run the beached ships down to a half-tide. There was crowding of small boats to take men off to those which rode at anchor in the stream. There was shouting for grappling-irons, and for nets; for bundles of bow-shafts, and pikes, and of throwing-spears.

There was shoreward running of those who had been further off than they should when the trumpets called.

Yet from confused noise and rushing of men there was swift order came, for they were seamen from birth, and they did that which they knew.

One by one, with toil of oars, and using the wind as much as might be with a close-hauled sail, the long-ships put out to sea.

Thorkeld ruled here, having been chosen chief of the Dee-fleet. With a south wind he would have made time to join with those who lay in Mersey pool, but, as it was, he must be content to know that they had been warned, and to think that they would be swift to his aid. It was much that they had had tidings brought. But for that, their ships might have been burnt where they lay.

So he thought, as he stood on the high deck, and steered to the wider sea. He was ever one who would helm his own ship when the battle joined. The fleet followed the course he took, and trailed out to a white-winged line, like a flight of birds on the summer sea.

There were other birds now, in a longer line, or in two, that came fast down the wind, and were very near to those which showed the Danish raven as their mast-head flag.

Once or twice, a trumpet sounded over the water from the viking fleet, giving order from Thorkeld's ship. . .

CHAPTER XVII

Elfwin stood on the castle roof, from which she would watch the fight.

She saw a shore which was dense with folk. Distant and small, but clear as a pictured scene, she saw the viking fleet that lay in battle-order await, and the Wessex fleet that came on to its attack.

The sun shone: the sea was blue as the sky. The fleets

met in a clear light. There was nothing of the smoke or dirt of a sea-fight of a later time. Arrows rose in the air, but they looked to be of little menace, except to those who knew. They were not too fast for the eye to follow their flight as they rose, and they would settle gently as a resting bird, but they pricked deep where they fell.

There were some in either fleet (though not many) who had good skill with the bow. They were used to pick off the steersmen from the ships they fought. Some of these, being much exposed, would have a man beside with a large shield, whose duty was to watch for the coming shaft, and to interpose his defence.

It was not a part to choose. He might guard the steersman's head with a high shield from a dropping shaft, and feel one in the calf of his own leg, where it was bare of leather or the quilted cloth that his body wore.

Across the water there came ever the noise of the distant shouting of men. It was a murmur that never stilled.

The ships dodged and sundered and joined as though they played in the wind, but they closed ever, one after one, with a casting of javelins from deck to deck, and then they would grapple or ram, and there would be fighting on bulwarks that pounded each on each, and a fighting with axe and sword that might be too fierce to see that it strove on a sinking deck.

As yet, there were more ships in Edward's fleet, and they were larger (for the most) and better built. It

would be too much to say that they had better crews. But though they had numbers and weight, they fought at a great loss. For the Danes had the close shore, and, having oars, they cared not greatly that it were weather or lee. But they cared much that there was near haven for a damaged ship, and that boats came from the shore bringing new stores of shafts, and fresh men for the weakened crews.

Yet the fight went hard for the pirate fleet, till there was sight of sails from the north, and fifty ships from Mersey pool came crowding in no order but that of their own speed, to turn the scale of the day.

The Wessex fleet must draw clear as it might to make front for a new foe. It did this with skill, though with a loss of some into which the viking fangs had sunk too deep for release. It did not fly yet, for it was manned by those who were of stout heart, and who had orders from their king that if they could not win by surprise they were to do the most harm in their power. But it was the only end that could be.

There came a time when Elfwin said to one who watched at her side, "Doth not Wessex fly from the fight ?"

"Ay, they do that." — It was Hacco's voice that replied, being one to whom she would not speak, but by such a chance as this.

He stood biting his nails. He did not look as pleased as he might.

She said, "Thorkeld hath had a hard fight. They are

good men, these vikings — they are good on the sea."

"Ay," he said, "they have the sea. It is nought to them."

Then he stopped, as though he had said too much.

CHAPTER XVIII

It can be said of this battle of Dee-mouth (for so it was to be called) which can be said of few such fights, that it pleased all.

There was riotous joy in Chester walls that night, and on Mersey banks, where (from their view) the Danes had good cause to be glad. For they had defeated the Wessex fleet, which had not been so treated in large battle for fifty years, the Danes seeking ever to avoid such issue with ships which were larger built than theirs, and coming off none too well when they had been forced to a fight.

As to Edward, when he heard, as he quickly did, he was neither wroth nor sad. His ships had done their part, as a dog that hangs for a time on a bull's nose, though it be trampled and gored at the last.

The Wessex fleet did not go home. It was in no state for such a voyage when the fight ceased. It ran north to Morecambe Bay, where it lay, licking wounds.

Hearing where it lay, Thorkeld said again, "It is a joy to be in this war. He is a great king. He looks far."

So the Danes held revel till the rising of the summer sun, and before it set there was word that their outposts

were driven in, and that Ethelfleda's army was north of the Ribble bank.

CHAPTER XIX

Ethelfleda was over Mersey now, and that with scarce a blow struck, as her way was. For though she would send her armies to death to the last man (as at Derby gate) when she knew that it must be done for a great gain, yet she would ever spend her thought to win in other ways than by the changing of blows and death.

Now, in the short pause of the war, she had gathered all the horse that she had, and Edward had moved all of his own horse across her rear, and with this joined army, which was the most of mounted men that had ridden to one fight in Britain for half a thousand years, being twenty-three hundred in all, she had driven so swift a wedge that the outnumbered outposts of the Danes could but fall back to east and west, and let the horsemen through.

There were still Danes before the Pennine pass, and it could be seen from Chester walls that the Danish camp was far out on the North-gate road, but the line they held dividing Reged from its Mercian root had been cut as by a sharp knife, and it could not be joined again unless the Danish army would move out and fight with face to the hills from which it came, and with its back to the sea.

But that was a folly to which it was little likely to fall. These movements by land and sea might show the vigour of those against which it had ventured to come so far

from the high hills and barren moors in which had been its safety and strength, but they did not alter the fact that while Chester was in their hands the war was not won, and, first or last, it was there that the fight must be.

There were three days during which Elfwin saw little of Sithric, or any other with whom she had will to talk. They drew lines for trench and mound: they sounded swamps: they built high stockades: they tested bow-shot lengths.

On the fourth day, while the work still toiled, the Wessex army came from the south, and the Mercian from the west, and the noise of battle rose in a still air, and was heard in the British hills.

CHAPTER XX

Elfwin stood once again on Chester tower, but now she looked to the land. Had she looked to river and sea, she had seen nought but a closed bridge and a bare quay-side, and the half-empty ships that were held by men who were not yet well of cut or bruise in the sea-fight. There were scouting vessels far out to save surprise, but the ships' crews were lining wall and trench, and were too few for the space that had been laid out, so that they must shorten line to the west, and retire somewhat during the coming night, which they would not do in the day, lest it seem that they were driven thereto by the onslaughts of the Mercian host. For they had fought all that day, and had held their lines, but at a great cost.

Now there was pause of strife; for though the sun was not down, man cannot ever endure, and there had been orders that had withdrawn the attacking host to its own tents, where it would count its loss and talk of what should be on the next day.

She could see either to land or sea from this tower that her mother built, for Ethelfleda built well and with good choice of site, and judgment of the height that such a watch-tower would need.

She had seen nothing of Sithric all the day, for his way was not Edward's, who had long ceased to take weapon in hand, but would order from a safe rear, watching all with a cool mind, but Sithric would fight in style of the Danish kings. He must be leader in fact. He must stand up where the stockade cracked. His axe must be the first to fall on the inrush of the Wessex men. He must be most feared of all, so that common men would turn aside from where he passed, and his coming would make clear space in the hardest press of the fight.

. . . She had not feared for his life, which was in part from this, that she had regarded war from childhood as the use of men. It was customed risk; and, in part, that her mind was vexed by the grief of the fight itself and by the doubt of what good end there could be.

She could not watch him from where she stood, for he had taken post on the far right, so that he might face the Wessex levies rather than her Mercian kin. She knew well why he did this, and was grateful at heart, though

there had been no word. There was so much now that must be left unsaid.

But all day she had watched the shouting waves of men surge forward to stockade and ditch, or to the great mounds of the more permanent works, and heard the din of blade on blade, and axe on helm and shield, and seen them driven back, and the urgent leaders check pursuit, lest it should go too far.

Or else the Mercian wave had broken through, and there had been rush from right and left, and of men held backward for such a need, and fighting, fierce and deadly, within the lines, and always at the end the Danes had renewed their front, and all was as it had been before — except for those who must bind their wounds and those who lay where they fell.

Sithric would come when he could, when he was washed from the dirt of strife. He would come to her before he ate. She had eaten nothing herself. She had not thought of food all the day.

There was nothing more to be seen, save that of which she had seen too much, but she was in no haste to go down.

One by one, the viking chiefs were coming in. They would hold feast in the great hall below. Already the voices of some could be heard, exultant, battle-drunk.

Stockade! Stockade! the steel-edged axes hew.
Washeil! Washeil! the wing-helmed ranks are through.

So they roared, calling for ale and mead (which they had been drinking all the day, between the bouts of the strife), and casting sword-belt and shield to bench or floor for the serfs to gather and clean for the coming day.

. . . Sithric came at last. He had done well at his point. He was more confident even than most of those who had seen the failure of the attacking force.

"They waste life," he said. "They break at pale and ditch. They will soon tire."

She said, "I cannot talk of that . . . But you are hurt ?"

It was little, he said with truth. An arrow in the upper arm — an arrow that was almost spent. It had not gone deep. But it was bound with a bloody rag, which was fouled with dust.

She had the fear of her time of a poisoned wound. It was a fear which was taught by many deaths. A man who lives in good air may heal of a deep wound, though as is said by one of the old time, "it show both liver and lungs" — but it must be clean, or he may die any one of several deaths.

So she said, "You will let me search it anew ?" and he knew that she would have her way.

She had pleasure in that, but then she said she would rest; and where she lay she could hear the riot that the vikings made, taking what comfort she could from the thought that Sithric had kept apart.

She heard the voice of Harulf, the Trondheim skald,

in a height of song that made nought of his own harp, and in such strain that there was silence, even from the half-drunken vikings to whom he sang.

Dawns shall not fail till Hella's doom to tread
The inviolate snows that heap the mountain's head.
Springs shall not fail till Hella's doom to see
The invading prows that break the southland sea. . .

Here was song that might stir any who heard, even though it spoke the pirate boast that had brought death and fire to many a peaceful land.

But it was a tune of many words, and soon the minstrel's voice had ceased, and there was a wild-roared chorus of a different sound —

The Saxon vales are fat with beef and bread.
Washeil! Washeil! the Danish hosts are fed.

It was an ill sound to a daughter of Wessex king and Mercian earl who would wed one of the robber race, and had brought this war on her land.

CHAPTER XXI

The second day went much as the first. There was hard fighting from point to point. There were more places where the Saxons broke in, and were driven back. They had some small gains that they held, but they were dearly bought. It was known that the Mercians who

had been out on the Reged border had been called in to the last man. It was said in Chester that night that if the lines could be held for another day the Saxon host would have spent its strength, and could do no more.

Hacco walked still, biting his nails. He was in a great doubt.

Elfwin would say little, even to Sithric, when he came in from the barrier where he had fought, though she had doubted his safety ever, with a sick heart, through his second day. She went back to her bed, but she could not sleep. She could not pray. She knew not that which she would; only this slaughter of men, which seemed to lead nowhere, to cancel itself, was the worst thing that could be.

"Oh, God," she prayed, *"let it end. Let it end,"* but she felt she prayed to a deaf sky.

She had heard boast of slaughter of the Gloucester levies that night, who must have been men that she knew, and she had near said a foolish word, which showed (as it seemed to her) where her heart must lie. Yet did she will Sithric's defeat ? It would be his death in this trap, except he fled by the sea, and she saw that that was a small chance for one who fought as he, at the front stockade.

She could not say what she would . . .

CHAPTER XXII

The second night was the end of the great heat. It broke in storm, without rain at the first, but of such a kind that the thunder, which was overhead of the camping hosts, would sound again and again, before the echoes of the last had left the sky. The lightning killed three men in the Wessex tents, and some oxen in another place. It set on fire one of the ships that was anchored out, which burnt through the night.

All men said that it was the greatest storm they had seen, either by land or sea, or in any clime. The Northmen said, "Odin hath come, scenting the blood of so great a strife. Thor thunders through the sky. Tomorrow he will lead us to the final slaughter of his Christian foes." They took new heart from the storm.

Christian men knew not what to think. They said to their priests, "If there be no Thor, what is this?" The priests answered, "If there be such as Thor, he is devil, and no god."

There was no answer to that, but prudent men saw that it is well that no altar should be left bare.

After thunder, there came rain, and in such torrents that it could not be taken, even by the dry cracked land on which it fell. It filled the ditches that the Danes had dug: it poured down to the river in swift streams that made new channels for their need.

Sithric, going round his lines in the early dawn, looked with content at what he saw. He might be Christian

now, but it was plain to all that Thor was a great god, and had come to succour the Danish host.

A dry ditch is not a long delay to an active man, but if it be the channel of a moving flood, or of a deep mud bottom, and of slippery sides, it is the worse for those who struggle up to where the axemen wait to greet them at the mound-top.

Edward did not believe in Thor, either as devil or god, but he cursed the storm in his heart and set himself to give the orders for the day as though it had not been.

Elfwin slept ill with such weather without and with the misery of her own mind.

She thought she had not slept at all (in which she was wrong), but she was exhausted by the watching of the last two days, waiting for an end which did not come, and she rose as one in a dream from which she would never wake.

She climbed again to the tower roof which her mother had built, thinking not that it would ever come to such use. She was wearied, so that her feet were slow, but she would still watch. It was all she could do, for she had no friend when Sithric and Thorkeld were at the war. There was none that asked her aid.

She passed Hacco on the stair. He looked ill. The words came to her mind that she had said to Sithric, and which he would not heed, because she would say no more. "Hacco should hang," but she thought of them as having been said in a dream but an hour ago — a

dream of which she would recall more if she could, but it would not come.

Sithric came to her side. He was in good cheer, but she would not rise to his mood. He held her hard; but she said, "Nay, I have no will to kiss more." And then, though she knew not why, "Hacco should hang."

"Why," Sithric answered, "what of that? So he should, and so he will in the end. He is a two-faced dog. But you are over tired, watching too long. All goes well. We are near the end. We will make a firm peace. We will have good days, as we said . . . Elfwin, you must not fail at the last . . . My arm? It is nought at all. It hath been at ease, for you searched it well."

She kissed then, holding him very hard for a time, and parted with brave eyes and a given smile, for she was of her mother's race at the root; but she thought, "It is the end, for so I learnt in the dream which hath left my mind. We have kissed our last for this world."

So he went down the stair with a gay word, for he would raise her mood if he might, and she turned to lean on the tower wall, and to gaze over a moving scene that steamed to the summer sun.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Romans built Chester four-square, or nearly enough to that shape, but Ethelfleda found that it stood too far from the river channel (which may have shifted, for it was built on a far day), and so she lengthened its

walls to the river-side, and to the support of the bridge-head, but the gates to east and north still stood as they had of old.

The Danes, being too many for the walls to hold, had spread camp on either side of the town, holding as much as they might of the river bank, and with the curve of the river, and in the way they lay, this meant that the north-east angle of the wall projected furthest toward the Saxon lines, as any who will may see that it must have been.

The Danish camp was advanced from the wall, even at that point, but not far; and it was there that they had been forced back more than elsewhere on the second day. Indeed, the Mercians had once fought along the wall to the North-gate, but it had been no gain to them, and in the end they had fallen back, with more loss than was good to think.

It seemed that it was their first aim, by pushing in at this point, to win to the wall, and cut the Danish camp in halves on either side of the town, but, even should they do this, it was little to gain or lose, for the Danes could still pass from camp to camp if they would through the city streets, or by the river way.

Yet it was here again that the worst force of the attack must be met on the third day, for after some hours of assault that broke, now here now there, from end to end of the lines, so that the Danes knew not where to gather their greatest strength, there was assault at this point so sudden and so fierce that the Mercians won to the wall

once more, and once more made their way beneath it, till they came to the North-gate, before the Danes, who had made their plans for this from what they had learnt before, could bring up such numbers as would (as they thought) make sure that those who had come so far would make lasting stay.

Elfwin did not see the course of this fighting at its first advance, it being too close under the angle of the wall (for the tower which Ethelfleda had built was on a great mound at the further side of the town, looking north and west, to bridge and river and sea), but she could overlook the wall-side that came to the North-gate, and the gate itself, on both sides.

She saw that the Mercians had won by this sudden rush to beneath the gate, though at a great cost, and she looked to see them driven back as before, for what help is there in a closed gate? But what she saw was not that, for there were men who worked at the inside, and the bolts rose, and the great bars fell, and the huge gates, heavy with oak and iron, swung right and left to the dragging of many hands.

Elfwin spoke aloud, where there was none to hear. She said, "I told him Hacco should hang. Why would he not heed?"

She did not know that she spoke. She was not conscious either of grief or fear. She had known all day that such things would be.

But it came to her mind that this would have been saved had she denounced the Gloucester spy, and she

said again, not knowing that she spoke, "I bring many to death."

Now she saw a new thing. All might not have been lost, though Hacco had betrayed the gate. Danes ran fast from the outer camp. They came from all sides. It seemed that the winners of that gate might have lived longer with slower feet, but as it swung wide there came a charge of the Wessex horse, which had been near await for this thing to be.

They were first at the gate. . . They came on still, Wessex and Mercian horse, more than two thousand strong, the men who had cut the Reged line on the earlier day. They held the gate now in force, both within and without the town. They cleared wide space without, among foes who cried already that the town was lost, of whom the vikings' men were already running for the river-side, and the men of the North-Humber lands were running they knew not where.

Wessex poured into the town.

Elfwin looked down on a scene of havoc and death that spread from the limits of the Danish camp to the streets that were beneath her walls.

The Danish army had ceased to fight. It knew that the town was lost, though it knew not how, and it sought only to run.

Yet how could it do that ? It was in a slaughter-pen, with the Saxon host all round except on the river-side, and there were not ships to take half of them off, even had there been time.

But the ships were anchored in mid-stream, or were pulled up on the shore, or were already cutting cables in haste, and hoisting sails, and making off while they might, careless of who were left to take death ashore.

Elfwin looked to the south. It was there that Sithric had held his line with ease till this cry came. Now he was in the midst of men who would run, but knew not which way it should be. There were Saxons on their right, and before: there was city wall on their left: there was swamp behind at this point. There would be some that would fight way through the Saxon host: there would be some that would founder in the swamp: there would be some that would drown or swim: there would be many to die: there was only Sithric who would make his way to the East-gate that he might enter the town.

Sithric was young and strong. He was bold, and of a bitter wrath. He knew what he would do, which few did. He had in his hands the keen twice-bladed axe with which he had fought well for the last days. He made way.

Elfwin saw him now, as he fought his way to the gate. She saw it from where she stood, cameo-clear, as though of a tranced mind rather than a natural sight.

While he came nearer the gate, she had feeling that her fate had changed, and that all would be well. She called to him, unaware. Did he hear through the half-mile space, and the roar of the dreadful strife ?

There was one that withstood his way. She saw the axe whirl round to a level blow. She saw the man's head

leap from its place. It was a great stroke. She knew that he fought thus to reach her side.

. . . Now he stood still. He saw, as she could not, that the Wessex horse had ridden through the town, and now held the gate with a force that he could never hope to break. To try that was to lose all. He remembered the plan that he and Thorkeld had made for such defeat, and he flung down the heavy axe, and turned and ran as hard as he might for the place where the swamp came close up to the wall, but where there is space to pass for those who fear not to wade deep.

Elfwin saw him run.

She said aloud, "I had done better than this. At least, I had done no worse." She was thinking of God.

She still stood as though it were a dream in which she had no part, but could only watch, till she saw that the square which was in the centre of the town, and which was clear under her view, was filled with the Wessex horse, and that they turned in files to ride up the street that led to the Bridge-gate, and to the castle on which she stood.

Athelstan rode at their head. At his sight she waked wide.

She said, "Shall they take me here to be prize or mock ? I have brought many to death. I think that I would die too."

She went down the stair, to a street where death was easy to find.

CHAPTER XXIV

Bear Thorkeld came up a street of flight and chase, where blood ran.

He had his sword out, and he looked many ways with his one eye, but he smote at none. He had no lust to kill in a lost cause, and if there were Saxons there who knew him for whom he was, they looked aside, seeking easier prey, for Bear Thorkeld was one to fear.

Also, he walked as having right, not as one who would flee, so that he drew not pursuit, for men are like dogs in this, that they will give chase to that which runs, but will yield way to a quiet front.

Thorkeld neared the tower, as Elfwin came forth. She would have passed him as one not known, but he took her arm in a hard grip.

He said, "We are well met. It is time saved."

He drew her back to a side way.

It was none too soon, for the horsemen rode up the street to the castle gate.

She said again, as to herself, "I bring many to death. I think I would die too."

He answered to that, "So you think, but you will find that God hath a different way."

This reached her mind, recalling that which he had said two days ago.

She answered (as she had thought before), "Is this the

way unthought? Were I God, I could have done better than this."

Thorkeld said, "So He will."

She said again, "I could have done no worse."

"Well," he said, "as to that, you shall learn God's way. But you should come to it at better pace. I am too old to be slain like a caught rat."

He had hard grasp on her arm, and he made her move at the pace he would. So they came to the quay.

CHAPTER XXV

They stood under the wall at the place where it had been agreed to meet, but Sithric was not there. Thorkeld knew that he should have been first. If he were not there, the chance that he lived was not worth a monk's prayer. That is Thorkeld's value, not mine. He looked round, but he knew it vain, and he saw too that it was death to stay.

He said nothing of whom he had thought to meet, lest she should loiter the more.

He said only, "Can you swim ?" and when she did not reply, "Well, you must now; or we shall both drown."

He threw off his cloak as he spoke. He had cast down a sword he loved. He must lose all to come clear from this pass.

He said, "You must strip for this. We must beat the tide."

She did it not to his will. She had on a short kirtle

of the kind that were then worn by those of a good estate.

He said, "Thor's bolt! You are hard to rule. You will need all your legs. Would you lose life for a rag?"

He tore the kirtle clear with a rough hand.

She looked at him as one surprised in a dream.

She said, "You will leave my shift?"

He said nothing to this. They went into the river together. She could swim better than he.

So they came to the side of his own ship, which had lain in the place he would for the last three days, that it might be ready at such a need. Now it had more than its full crew, for others had swum to its side, and the master had taken in such as looked worth, and as many as he could hope to feed.

The wind came from the southeast. It was fair enough for their need. They got out oars. They went fast down the stream, though the tide rose.

They thought they were clear, when they were crossed by two ships that had been seized by the Wessex men. Thorkeld must lean hard on the helm, or they had been struck by a vicious prow. They changed shafts, with some loss. They were no nearer to the second ship than to draw some casting of javelins, which fell short.

Then they were out on a clear sea.

The captain came to Thorkeld, and said, "Master, shall I steer for Skye? We cannot feed all these for the Orkney run."

Thorkeld answered to this, "We go not north at all. I am not for Edward's trap. He hath all his fleet lying in Morecambe Bay."

So it was. They came out as the viking ships that had got free from Dee and Mersey mouths fled north in a blind haste, and they grieved them much.

But Thorkeld had sailed west and south, and lay with a friend he had in Cork Bay, where he was safe as in Stromness itself, and could think again of the plans which he had put aside for Sithric's help, which had proved but loss in the end.

As they reached on that course, they came on a merchant ship, that was Gloucester bound, and its master looked (at the best) to have gone home with an empty hold, but he was asked no more than to take a letter for the Queen's hand, and to bear word that her daughter lived, which he swore that he would do, by his patron saint and by some others of whom Thorkeld had heard; and this he did, having a good voyage, and being overtaken of none.

For Elfwin would not return to her own land till she should know surely that Sithric was dead.

CHAPTER XXVI

Edward and his sister sat side by side, and Hacco stood between guards.

There was that in Edward's eyes which he did not like, yet he had Ethelfleda's written word, and it had

been left on him (to his own surprise), when they had taken much else.

"Lord," he said, "if I did ill, yielding from fear to the Danish threats, I did well when the time came. Had I not opened the gates, you had not won as you did."

Edward said, "I would have those to hold my gates who are of a bold heart, and a settled faith."

Hacco feared from this that he might lose his charge, which he would be loth to do.

He said, "Lord, I have the Queen's written word that I should have my charge renewed and a rich reward if I would open the gate, which I did at a great risk, having to buy many, and being sure of none. Lord, I took the Queen's word as thine, having my charge from her at the former time."

Edward said, "You did rightly in that. To such as thee we are one. Let me see the scroll."

He read it with care. He said, "How is this? It was to be opened on the second day. It was a day late. There are four hundred who died for that."

Hacco answered with such lies as were hard to judge. He could not say that he had waited to see if the Danes would win, which would have given him a more easy way.

Edward said, "It shall be tested with care. Take him away."

At the end of three days he knew all.

He wrote, "In Chester, at the North-gate, on the day on which the market is held, let him be hanged on a

short rope, and give orders that none shall pull his legs, for I would that he kick long, to the learning of others such, which are not few in those parts."

So it was done, and they hanged Hacco at Chester gate as Hermild had hung at Derby six months before (or it may be eight), and the next who had charge of the gates kept his guard well.

CHAPTER XXVII

THORKELD said, "I have tidings which you will wish to hear, though they may bring no joy."

"Of Sithric there is nothing heard, or it is known rather (so far as such things can be known, when the dead are thrown to the common trench, or are washed to sea), that he was killed under Chester walls.

"Regnald is king in York, and he makes peace with the South. He will pay tribute to Wessex's king. Edward doth what he will through the whole land.

"My new ships were near to be lost, where they have been built in the Tyne, but Beowulf is a good man and hath served me well. He had them forth in the night, and they are safe at Stromness with all their men.

"I cannot stay longer here, for I must winter where I can get all in rule for to sail in the spring days. I am for Stromness. I go round the Galway coast and would sail while the seas are kind. Yet I would not leave you here, except it be of your own will. . . Sithric is sure dead. You may home if you will. . . Yet there are

other ways. . . If you have will to wed — which I thought never to do . . . But you are not as most. . ."

Elfwin said, "You are good friend. You have been more than friend at a bitter need. But I think not to wed. I will home as I best may."

"Well," said Thorkeld, "that is plain speech as your way is. It may be best so, for I was not born to bide in one place. I should be ill to hold. Yet I am one to keep bond. . . There is ship at the quay now that will sail for Gloucester in ten days' time, and you can go if you will."

He went out. He gave gold to the captain of *The Stout Heart*. He gave him also a sign which would bring him clear of about half the pirates of the western seas, if it should be shown in the right way. He would not have that Elfwin should be sold for a Spanish slave.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Waiting the tide, as she must, and having paid her dues, *The Stout Heart* came to Gloucester quay before the rise of the October sun, and by the light of a full moon in the west.

There were few that moved in the town as Elfwin went, by narrow ways that she knew, and could have found as well in a moonless dark, to her mother's palace, that lay west of the church, and had been her home for nearly twenty years till the last spring, being her life's length, as we know.

She went up by foot and hand to a low roof, and by a further way that she had used often in younger days, till she came to her own room, which she found empty, and as she had left it when she had gone to Worcester six months before, thinking not that she would be absent so long.

She did not stay here, but went down the passage that led to her mother's rooms, hearing sounds of movement below as she did this, for the dawn was near. Yet the palace was quiet for such an hour, and she thought, "My mother cannot be here, or they would not laze as they do when the light comes. She will be at Tamworth, which she most loves. I shall not see her today."

So she came to the outer room, where Gerda slept when the Queen was there, and looked in, calling her name in a low voice, and Gerda half rose from her bed, and, seeing her, Elfwin knew that she would have no further to go, for she was ever beside the Queen.

Gerda knew her voice well enough. She said, "I told the King you would come."

Elfwin said, "It is all done now. Sithric is dead. . . Is the door barred, or may I go in now ?"

Gerda said, "You may go in."

Elfwin had spoken softly, lest the Queen slept. Now she twirled the pin as gently as she might, and went in.

Her mother gave no sign that she heard her come, and, seeing that she slept, Elfwin went to the bedside, and sat there on the floor, as she had often done in the old days, that she might be there when her mother

waked, for, till she had worn the brooch and her mother would have her take it off and she would not, they had loved well.

But the brooch was still at her throat, and it should be so till she died. She had altered not at all, but God had had His own way, as He will, and so she had come back, for where else should she be ?

So she sat and waited for her mother to wake, and at last, as a faint light grew in a darkened room, and she knew that there must be day without, she said,

"Mother, will you not wake ? It is Elfwin has come back. — It is your Little Sin."

But there was no answer at all. For Ethelfleda was dead.

CHAPTER XXIX

Gerda said, "There are things you should see, and one which I have not shown to the King, for I was sure that you would come back, and it is for you to deal as you will."

For Edward was in Gloucester, and he had called in a great force to do honour (as he said) at his sister's grave, and Gloucester filled with his men.

There was a letter for Elfwin, which the Queen had written before she died, and closed with her own seal, and which Gerda was to give to none else.

Elfwin read this. She wept for some time after that. She thought, "It had been better had I not been." She

said aloud, "Mother, there is none shall know this ever but we two." She sought fire, watching it burn to the last ash.

There was another letter which was half-writ. It was to Edward, and her mother had been writing this when a pain came, and it must be left for a time, and she had thought to finish it at the next hour, which she was not able to do. It was that night that she died.

Gerda said, "You should read that. I would not give it to the King, not knowing your will."

Elfwin said, "If it be for the King, it is to him only that it should go."

"As to that," Gerda said, "who can say what its end had been, or that the Queen your mother would have had it go as it is, being half-writ? She was too ill then to know well what she wrote, having so much pain. It is for you to see first."

"Well," said Elfwin, "if you say this, so I will," and she read the scroll.

It was nought of moment at the first (that is, to her), and then she came to these words,

As to Elfwin, should she come back, as I think she may, Sithric being now known for dead, should you still wish, as our last talk was, that she take the veil, you have freedom of me, for you must think first of this realm, and it may be in Shaftesbury if you will, but as to its strong walls, I would tell you this, that she is one that no walls will hold; but if she take the vow she will keep that she hath sworn.

So in this you may deal with a strong hand, having this letter from me, yet I pray much . . .

And so it ceased, the last words being writ with a lagging hand.

Elfwin looked at this, and said, "Hath none seen ?"

Gerda said, "There is none but we."

"Yet it is for the King's hand."

"Then is Mercia down. The King will snatch at the land. He will use this to your grief."

Elfwin said, "He will take the land if he sees the letter or no. That is a sure thing."

Gerda said to that, "Yet you are queen now. Mercia is more strong than it was. There would be blows first. We want not Wessex here."

"As to that," Elfwin replied, "I will have no more war. I have seen how it wastes lives and the land. But for that, I were for Tamworth to gather strength. I were away at this hour. My uncle would know that I am of my mother's blood at the last. I would give him good fight. . . But I will have no war. . . Yet it is all to be thought well. There is no need for haste. I must see what is right to do."

She slipped the scroll down at her neck, between tunic and shift, where it would lie well.

CHAPTER XXX

Anselm preached in the great church at Gloucester which had been builded in better days, being of oak and stone, very strong and spacious and high. The church was full of folk, so that they stood close in the aisles, and were in the porch, and on the outer stones, in a great crowd.

In the street there were Edward's mounted guards in a long file: there were his guards at the Cross: there were his guards at the four gates: there were his guards at the quay.

There was too much of the Wessex badge for the liking of Gloucester folk, but they would not brawl while their queen lay as she did, so they scowled and waited to see what it might mean at the last.

Edward sat in the royal pew, as was right, and Athelstan was at his side.

There was none but few who knew that Elfwin was there. She found a seat where she could.

Anselm was very old. He would seldom preach in these days, for he could not stand but with a staff's aid, and even so his knees would fail very soon, but he would have that none other should speak this day.

He took the text, *I have fought a good fight: I have finished my course: I have kept the faith,* being the high boast of Paul, when he was wearied of body, but unbroken of soul, and had seen that the end was near.

And as Anselm spoke of the dead queen, and of what

she had done for the land, he forgot his age, and his strength came, so that the staff dropped from his hand, which was a strange thing to see.

He called her the shield of Mercia, moving the hearts of men. He reminded them that while she had ruled the land the old Wessex feud had been held in check, and that the two had fought as one, to the loss of their common foes.

He said that her shield was gone, but that the shield of God was still over them, if they would seek the way of peace among Christian folk.

He said that though she was dead that day, her care for the land she loved would not cease to work to a good end.

He had to give them a solemn charge which he had from her dying lips that Wessex and Mercia should hereafter be a single realm, and that the great king, her brother, should rule it, not as Wessex overlord of a lesser land, but as equal monarch of an England of Christian men. So should they have peace in the land, and so should the church prevail, and the heathen be scattered.

He reminded them that Athelstan, who would succeed (they prayed, at a distant date) to his father's crown, had been brought up from infancy in the Mercian land, so that it was Wessex rather than they to whom he would come as a stranger king. Of Elfwin, or of her right, he said nothing at all.

At the last, he gave solemn warning that if there should be any who, from schism or pride, should oppose

the will of the queen to whom they owed the freedom which was their boast today, either by factious opposition, or by the calling of hundred-moot, or folk-moot, to discuss that which should be taken for a settled thing, they would be judged as traitors to the concord of a Christian land, and would be excommunicated from the rites of God.

CHAPTER XXXI

Elfwin met the King at the meal. There was none but they two.

He greeted her kindly enough, looking at her with eyes which would search her mind.

He came straight to his point, saying, "You heard Anselm in the church. Is it well ?"

She said, "It is my mother's will and it is best for the land. Only there is one thing you must know, that Athelstan I will never wed."

He smiled slightly at that.

"As for now, you are not asked."

"Then we are of one mind."

He was silent for a short space, having that to say which she might not hear with a good will, and in this pause she said,

"I have letter for you. It is one that my mother wrote as much as she might on her last day."

She gave it him with the word.

He read it two or three times and was slow to look up. Then he said,

"Had you read this ?"

"I read it all. Else had I not judged what to do."

"You give it to my hand, knowing what is here writ ?"

"I do what my mother would, she being dead."

He considered this. He had another thought.

He said, "You come here but today. How came this not to my hand ? Where hath it lain ?"

"Uncle," she said, "you may be Wessex king, and overlord here, yet you may ask more than you should. I would let you know that this is my house, my mother being dead, and I will that you ask such questions of none but me."

Edward showed no feeling at this rebuke. He considered it, as his way was, with a quiet mind.

He said, "It is you I have asked."

"Then I say that that which my mother left should come first to my sight. I came here at this dawn. I give your letter this day. Is it well ?"

He said, "It is well enough. It had been burned by most, seeing what is herein writ. Yet it will alter nought. I had this to tell, that I must hold you from now in strait walls, which I do for the realm's good, as a king must."

Elfwin was silent at that, and, though the King was of a practised mind to know how a word went, he could not tell what she thought.

At the last she said, "By what right would you do that ?"

"Well," he said, "you are of my blood, and my sister's child. There shall be plain words. It is with no right at all. It is that there be one land here when we are both dead.

"After what hath been, you should not have come here, would you have stayed free."

"I came to my mother's side, not knowing that she was dead."

"But God did."

"You say I am trapped of Him ?"

"I say nought of that, but to match your own word. Yet will God rule at the last. You thought to be queen at York. You would have torn this realm for your own lust like a slit rag. What hath been ? You were but God's bait. You brought the Danes to our net. . ."

"Uncle," she said without heat, "if you speak so, I must say that you lie. As for God, He may be of no more than your own height: that is for Him and you. But you know me less than you think.

"You have said that there shall be plain words between us two, and that is well, for I think till this world end, that we shall speak never again. But there are some things that shall be said now.

"You are a great king. You are more wise than I. All men would say that. Yet I think in much of this I have done right and you wrong.

"Sithric, whom I loved well, is dead, as you know. I

have thought much in these last days, have I done wrong and how far, and I will tell you this. Would I wed him now if he still lived ? That I would: there were no convent for me.

"I think not to rule the world, nor to make the future of men. If God fail, shall He lay it at my door ? I think Him too great for that.

"But in this last, you do twice err. My mother would not so have judged, as her scroll shows. I am not one that would be held in strait walls would I win free. And you may think too, that I might have been on Tamworth road at this hour. Yet I think that even you do know me so far as that. I am not one to rouse war for a crown's gain.

"But you erred also in this. You might have come where you would by a clean road had you asked my will. For I came here of this mind, not knowing of my mother's death, that I would be bride of God, having known grief."

Edward said nothing to this. He looked at her with thoughtful eyes, and his hand moved in the crumbs.

After a pause, she said, "If you would take my right, I have this only to ask. I would not go quite alone. I would have Gerda, my mother's maid, whom I have known from my birth."

The King said, "That is a little thing. You are the Lady Elfwin. You may go with what train you will."

CHAPTER XXXII

Sithric said, "I am not dead, as you see. I was in water and mud, and knew not how ill I was hurt, for I had but one thought, which was to win to the place at which we should meet, and I was pulled to a boat by my namesake, the Dublin king, and so they got me aboard at last to his own ship, but they were afloat for some hours before that could be, for his ship lay in Mersey pool. That is how it is told to me, but I know nought of my own mind, lying in the boat's well with a cracked skull, which was hard to mend."

Thorkeld said, "That is plain tale; yet I see not why there was no word that you had won clear."

"That was of my own will, for I thought long as I lay, and it seemed that if it were known that I still lived they would hold Elfwin in the more tight bonds. I thought not that you could have got her free."

"That is plain too; yet it hath worked ill, for she would have come to your side with a blithe heart, were you king or churl, and now she hath gone back to Gloucester town, and what hath chanced you can judge as well as I, for she will have found the Queen dead."

This was at Stromness, where Thorkeld fitted his ships in the cold days, and chose his crews, for he would sail when the spring came for a far goal, at which most men laughed.

Sithric said, "I am no king now, and the gold I had is

spent. I have not that which would buy a whole cloak, which is why I dress as I do. Yet I will find my way there, though I must walk through the Scottish hills. If she have married the King's son (which I do not think), I will ask you for the command of one of your ships, or for such place as you think I am fit to hold, and I will sail with you to where you will — but I must know first."

"If you try to walk through the Scottish hills," Thorkeld answered, "you will try a thing which would be of a great folly, even should you get through alive, which is a small chance. For you would seek that which would come to you at a better pace if you stay here.

"All talk comes to Stromness. If you wait here, it will soon be said. But I will offer this, which I do with a friend's heart, though it may be a good bargain to me.

"As to gold there is no stint: you can have your need.

"I cannot sail till the spring days, but when I do you shall come. You shall have charge of my new ship, which I have called by her name, for it is a good word to bear on a prow that would break new seas. It is best and largest of all, but it is not for me, for I am old to change. I would pull on a known helm.

"I will have all found before then, where she is housed, and in what state; and, if she be yet unwed (as I think to find), we will bear her off, though we go by night to the land's core, and you shall put her in the

south Irish land, where none will seek her again, and you shall go ashore yourself if you will. But if she be wed, or of a changed mind, so that she doth not come, you shall swear both by your new gods and by your bracelet-snake, that you will put her face from your thought, and make bride of a ship which will prove of a better kind, and I shall have gained much for the giving of a light thing."

Sithric said, "You are good friend, making too much of what help I might be, and too little of what you do: but I will take it with thanks, being too poor to pay.

"Of my own will, I would seek by a shorter road, but your aid is too great to lose."

Thorkeld said, "I am too old for the haste which will overreach its end. Yet there shall be no time lost. You must leave all to me, lest there be talk that you still live, and she be the more closely held.

"As to that which you pay, if you should be wedded at the last, you will come to a good end, for you are too great of birth to stay low in such times. Edward may set Regnald up, but you are York's king, and you would have a great claim to her land.

"I should look to sit in your hall when I am too old for the sea-ways, if I were not dead before then, as we mostly are."

Sithric said again, "You are good friend, and it is wisely planned. Yet I can recall that we sat once before in Derby tower, and made plans which had a great

sound, and the Queen her mother made them nought when they were scarce said.

"I would that I had her here, or in Irish land, for I dread that is a thing which will never be."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE NUNNERY of Shaftesbury was on a bleak hill, to which the spring came late. It was founded by King Alfred, whose sister had ruled it at the first, and after that it had been in charge of his daughter Ethelgiva, who was Elfwin's aunt.

There was an older convent at Wimborne, nearer the coast, which was of a better climate, but it had been twice taken by raiding parties of Danes, once being burned after the nuns, warned in time, had hidden in the woods that are below West-Moors, and once sacked with all it held, and the nuns carried off to the vikings' ships, to be sold for slaves, or for what they would.

So the new convents that Alfred built were in the swamps of Athelney, or on high bare inland sites to which the plunder-seeking Danes would be unlikely to come, as at Amesbury, or this Shaftesbury, on a hill that rose from the chalk downs, where the grass was too poor for the fattening of cattle or for the making of winter hay.

The convent was strongly built of good stone, which could be quarried in those parts, and of wood solid and seasoned. For the house of Ethelwulf built to endure,

and used not the quick-growing firs and pines which are soft to work and quick to rot, as is done in a later day, but must have oak and ash, and elm and yew, felling such trees as were of a sound heart and a stubborn strength.

It had an outer wall of stone, and wooden gates of two men's height, which were well barred at all hours. It had also a great bell which could be heard in the town, and far over the downs, so that men could be called to its aid if there should be alarm of pillage or fire.

The Abbess, Ethelgiva, the King's sister, was one who would be little likely to have the bell rung for a light alarm. She had known several scares in the last twenty-five years, about which there had been one point of likeness, that they had all been false. They had disturbed her work, which was to gather and repair the old Saxon books which had been neglected and largely destroyed since the Danes came to the land, and on one alarm she had been over-persuaded to send her more valuable manuscripts to Dorchester, when they had been damaged by rain.

She was well liked in the convent, ruling her charges, who came or were sent to take the religious vows from very various motives, with an absent-minded wisdom, which could be stern or sympathetic as the occasion might require.

She had the same habit as Ethelfleda of holding aloof from a common intimacy with those among whom she moved, but of meeting one to whom she spoke at a rare

time in such a way that she would establish an instant confidence.

She was, for her time and race and creed, of a wide and tolerant habit of thought, and though the escapades and political levities of which Elfwin was accused or discredited were not such as were most like to rouse her to intellectual or emotional sympathy, it is probable that these barriers might have fallen had it not been more to Elfwin's mind that the courteous distance of their earliest greeting should remain uncrossed.

Elfwin observed the convent routines, its fasts and vigils and devotional exercises — which were not of an over-rigorous kind — without enthusiasm, but with an exact punctuality. She accepted its measured freedoms with the same punctilious observation. She went through the three novitiate months without inviting the sympathy or gaining the affection of any of the nuns around her.

She was like a plant that draws back from the autumn frosts, after the disaster of a broken flower and a seedless summer, gathering the strength of the dying stem to its secret roots, and lies through the winter days in apparent death, while gaining vigour and heart for the new venture of a further spring.

For she was of a higher kind than are those who will waste life for a dead love or a broken hope.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Thorkeld said, "There are tidings brought which you may think evil or good. She is unwed; but she hath taken vows, in the way of those of her faith, that she will wed none. Yet a vow is but a word."

Sithric said, "If she hath taken such vows, it is worse than death. It is worse than if she were wed, for that is no more than sword can cure, and a widow may be wed anew. But if she be vowed to her God, it is to One that no sword can reach, nor will death come with release. It is the worst news that could be. I am curst indeed that I have brought it to this end."

Thorkeld was grieved for his friend, but he thought he made it to be worse than it was. He said, "Yet are such vows put aside." He remembered cases of women who had taken convent vows and come forth, and married, and gone back to the nunnery walls, and come forth to marry a second time. There were such in England then, and in Flanders, and elsewhere. He spoke names.

But Sithric said, "There is no comfort in that, for she is of other kind."

"Then must we use gold."

"It is vain to think. Were I king as I was, I might get leave of the Bishop at Rome, even to bring her forth to be wed (with her own assent), or so I think, for I heard much of these things when I was held in Glouces-

ter for two years. But my power is lost, and Edward is a great king, and his voice would be louder than mine."

"Then must we have her by force."

Sithric thought at first that there was hope in that. It was to his mood. He said, "How far is she from the coast ?"

"She is in Shaftesbury, which is not far from the coast, but is not easy to reach. We should need to lie in Poole Bay, and it is thirty miles by a twisting road. It might be better or worse. Yet it might be done. You could take her to Irish land as we first thought."

"Yet were it no gain, if she came not of her own will. Would she wed me in Irish land, being so vowed ? I say it is worse than death, she being that which she is. There is no hope at all."

Thorkeld said, "Yet you were twice held, and she had you forth. You should do no less for her."

"But I came of a good will. I had no promise to bear."

"When she would have you free from the Derby tower, and they made closer their ward, she said, 'There is ever a new way.' That is for us to think."

But Sithric knew her too well. He would take no comfort at all.

CHAPTER XXXV

The Abbess came to the King. She said, "She hath wandered lone in the wild lands: she hath been with him she sought in the Danes' camp: she hath been lone in the vikings' ships. Yet she saith that she is virgin still, and it is as such that she would take the vows. What can be done in such case?"

The King thought, and said, "Sister, it is no likely tale. Yet she is of our blood. If she says this, it is true."

So Elfwin took the vows of those who come first to God.

CHAPTER XXXVI

They ran into Poole during the night, for they had heard of king's ships in Solent water, and (which was worse) of two that were then getting ready for sea at the Plym's mouth, and took shelter in a little cove where a wooded stream came to the sea, and, entering here by the light of a half-moon, they warped the *Elfwin* up as high as they might, which was not far, for she was a great ship, drawing more than six feet, and hid her well under the trees, with a lowered mast.

Here they lay close for the whole of the first day, and when the dusk fell they came out to a strength of nearly thirty men, which was all the crew of the ship. It was

no more than this, because Thorkeld thought of a far voyage, and the fewer the men, the more would the water last, and the salted food. They left none in the ship, for Thorkeld said, "If it be found we are sped. We shall be hunted beasts in the woods. Why should two die in the caught ship ?"

They went some hours in the night, making little way, for they must keep to the woods till the fires died on the cottage hearths, and they could hope that men slept well, as they would after the spring toil in the fields, which would be to the most of their strength; but then they took to a road, sending one ahead who was of quick feet, and of good sight in the dark, that he might warn them at need, and so they made better way, though still silent and slow.

When it was two hours from the dawn, they lay in a dense wood, close under the height of the chalk downs, thinking they had come safely through, and Thorkeld sent one forth to view the roads in a clear light, that he should find their best way to the convent walls, and also that he should be able to guide them for a more swift return, should they be at flight in the dark hours.

They lay there, very close and still (for there were swineherds in the woods), till it was dark again, and then they lit a fire (which was not a great risk at that place and hour, and being near to the time when they could hide no more), and were glad of warmth, for it was a chilling night, and had food, and in a further hour they had taken the road, being but five miles (or

it may have been six) from Shaftesbury hill. But the last miles must be over the bare down and could not be done till the night.

And by this way they came to the convent walls which stood up dark and quiet and very high at the hill-top, against the light of the moon, and of many stars, for it was a clear night. It seemed that none had heard as they came up the hill-side, for the convent was very still and showed no light at all.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Elfwin sat in her own room, which was high, and at a projecting angle, having windows which looked two ways, which she liked well.

It was on the inner side, looking over the high-walled garth, which she had made her care. That was well enough; but the soil was poor, and the air bleak, to one who had nurtured roses and wall-flowers and the high white lilies in the palace garden at Gloucester. It might well seem symbol of the bleak change that had fallen across her life.

Gerda sat at her frame. For twenty years she had worked at a set of wall-hangings which would show the tale of Judith as it was told by the Saxon poet of a better day. His name is gone; most of the poem at which he laboured and which brought him fame over half a world, is gone in the same way; his language is a dead thing;

but there is still that left by which we may learn how the song beat upward in short high javelins of sound that did not cease, as a wave throws surf to the sun. . .

Elfwin said, "You should leave that now. It grows dusk."

Gerda was loth to put the silks aside.

She said, "It is slow growth. Yet it moves faster than in the old days. There is quiet here. I have counted that it will be nigh done in five years. It will be no glad day for me."

For she saw that the joy of the work was more than there could be in a finished thing.

She was working now at the scene where Judith was about to cut off the head of the drunken king. The Saxon poet went his own way with this tale, and she followed by the same road. The bed on which the king lay was curtained in golden net, of such sort that those who were in could see out, but those who were out could not see in, as was common in the noble houses of that time, when men were many, and rooms were few.

That was how it was told in the song, and here the net was drawn half-way back, so that Judith could be seen dragging the limbs of the drunken king, that she might get him into such a form that she could use the sword on his neck with a full swing, for so also it is told in the song.

. . . Gerda said, "There is tiding today that Colchester falls. Guthrum will be at the King's feet."

Elfwin said, "Yes; he wins all. Athelstan will be heir to a wide realm."

Gerda said, "You would have made good queen."

"I should have had an ill time. I am saved from that. So is he."

Then she spoke of that which had been, which, even to Gerda, she would seldom do, saying,

"I had dream of Sithric last night. I was glad in the dream, for he came in a glad way, and when I would not go he took me with a strong hand. Then I waked and wept and after that I doubted how I should pray, having had such thoughts. Yet I saw at the last that God knew very well that had Sithric lived I were not here. I had been plain to Him in that. I see not that one may sin in a dream. Yet I would hold my vow when I wake."

Gerda said, "If he came now, would you not go ?"

"I would go not a step. I am of those who keep faith to God as to man. You should know me so far."

Gerda said nothing to that. The light failed, and they went to rest (having said certain prayers) as the rule was.

Elfwin slept for three hours, and then waked from the dream that she had had in the night before, but this time she waked in fear, which was a strange thing, for she was not one to fear much, but she had the thought in her heart, "had I not waked, he had had me forth of these walls," which she knew for a foolish thing, for what could chance in a dream ? Yet she felt that her

hands shook, as though they had fought too hard, and as she lay thus, she became aware that what had waked her in truth was the tolling of the great bell that called for aid in the night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ELFWIN said, "You do a great wrong, being here. I am bride of God by a strait vow. I will touch you never again."

She stepped back as she said this to the far side of the bed.

Sithric knew not what to do. He would not take her by strength, if there were other way, for he loved her well.

Yet he knew that men fought to keep clear his path at the outer gate, and delay might be death to all: he knew that the fire spread fast, and that the light by which they saw was not of the moon alone.

He said, "Then you will have my death for I will not go forth alone."

She said, "Then we die here, for the fire comes."

He was roused by that, saying,

"You shall not die so, come what may. I will bear you forth."

He followed till she could fly no more, catching her in a strong grasp, but she thought, "If I fight not to my life's end, I am traitor to God, which I will not be."

She had her arm in the bed rail and she would not loose.

He had not thought that she could have such strength. He was loth to do her the hurt he must.

She thought, "I am God's traitor yet, if I call not the most I may, though it bring those who may be his death."

At that, she called with a high voice, and it did that which she feared.

Gerda, whom she had sent to gain news, was coming back to her aid. She had a knife in hand, as she well might.

She saw Sithric's back, but she guessed not who it might be in the half light and the smoke, which came in yellow and dense, being of burning wood. She had no thought that Sithric should be one of these who had broken their peace. She thought him dead. She saw the back of one with whom her mistress strove, and against whom she cried at a sore need.

She struck out with the knife.

Elfwin saw what she willed to do. She cried in a sharp fear, "Gerda, not that ! Not that !"

Sithric looked round at the cry, and he was close to death. He used his strength on her arm more than he knew and the bone snapped.

Gerda saw his face, and the knife sank.

She saw how things were in a second's space.

She said, "There is short time at the best. It is all fire below. I will guide you as I can."

Elfwin knew no more. She was weight on his arm. He took a bear's skin from the bed, that he might wrap her face from the fire. He bore her over his shoulder as best he might, for he would have his sword free. He saw not that her arm hung loose as he moved. He followed where Gerda led.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The King's Reeve called on them to yield in the King's name.

"Reeve," said Thorkeld, "let us talk sense. I am Thorkeld of the one eye, of whom you may have heard tell; and you are the King's Reeve of Shaftesbury, which must mean that you are a good man, having knowledge of war.

"We have one dead on our side, and there are those on yours who have lost blood which they would put back if they could.

"I have thirty men here who are well weaponed and skilled in strife, and you have twice that who are of all kinds, as they left their beds an hour since.

"We stand here at the garth gate, which is a narrow way, and, if we would we could hold it till dawn.

"I will say more than that. If I will that we fight through, I will bring my men clear with a loss of not more than five, for I know that there will be those of yours who will not stand up to the pikes which my men bear.

"Yet we are in an ill pass, as I will own, using plain words in all. We have ship laid in Poole Bay, and this we should never reach, though you knew not where it was hid, for you would rouse the land, and it were the deep woods for us, and a poor end at the last.

"But you must think of this too. We stand here at the garth gate, and behind us two score nuns, who would forth if they might, but there is no way.

"We will not let them out here, and before them is such wall as they cannot scale, and behind them the convent burns.

"If we let them free, do you swear that we go in a good peace, being stayed of none till we are three miles out from the shallows of Poole Bay, after which we will guard ourselves? For if you will not this, you must think that they have throats which were soon cut."

The reeve was a troubled man. He said, "You would never that. You have not that name."

"As to that," Thorkeld answered, "you should not build over-high. You must think that I have thirty Danes here whom I lead, and whom it is my part to bring clear. Shall I count their lives less than are those of two score of your women who do not breed?"

"Yet," said the reeve, who was a man of good sense, and of an honest kind, "there is more trouble than you may see. For the King might say, 'I would have you know that you are Shaftesbury's reeve by my will. Did you think you were king? It is for this you shall hang,

and the Danes too !' You ask for that which I have no warrant to give."

"Yet," said Thorkeld, "that may be eased. For the Abbess here is the King's sister, as all men know. If she join her word, it is a bond which the King would neither break nor chide."

Thorkeld said this as a last throw, and with an inward doubt, for he had learnt enough of her race to know that what the Abbess might say was less than a sure thing.

As for her, she had stood near enough to hear that which had been said, as had some of her charge, who had taken it with a less quiet mind. To this point she had been most concerned that the nuns should keep to the stone paths, for the beds and bushes were wet.

Now she said, "It is a vain thing that you should ask me. The reeve must do as he will. It is he that is here to make order in the King's name, that not being my part at all. If he make terms that you go free, you being well trapped as you are, you will do evil elsewhere, and it is a guilt which I will not take. If you do wrong to us, and the King shall flay you while you yet live (which is a likely thing), you will have time to think of the worse hell to which you are bound by that path. We are not the first that have been martyred by heathen sword."

"Lady," Thorkeld replied, with such patience as he could use, for at the moment he cursed her in his heart, and all her house which were so ill either to guide or drive, "you should know your God, and it may be that

you will make your report, saying that you brought those of whom you had charge to their deaths, or to such use as we will, because by that means you could be sure that certain Danes would be flayed while they yet lived; but if you go on to boast that you have saved the world from the ill deeds which were yet to do, He will not be much moved, for He will know (if He be such God as you would have us think) that we are for a far voyage, and would do evil to none."

Ethelgiva answered to this, "Do you swear by your gods that we shall all go free, or is there that which your mind hides ?" For she was of a clear thought, and she guessed why they had come, since she had heard his name.

"Lady," Thorkeld said, "there is none shall go our way, but it be with a blithe heart."

"Then I know well whom you mean. She will be glad to go if she must; for she hath cared never for aught that our walls hold, though it would vex her mind that you tread this garth as you do, which is ill for the spring growth. . . Yet I see her not in your band, and I doubt that she be one who would break vows at her body's call."

"As to that," Thorkeld said, "I have a like fear. For he who should have brought her out hath been long within, and the flames are high. I have a fear that we have done this for nought."

Now in these words Thorkeld spoke to better end than he knew, for it turned her eyes to the burning pile,

and she saw that the east wing was yet clear, and it was there that her books were kept, which she valued at much more than the lives of two score of nuns, though it was that which she would neither have thought nor said. They might be saved yet by the aid of the men that were round the gate.

Yet she would not be in too great haste, even for that, and she said, "If I make these terms, swearing them by a sure oath, will you swear as much as you may by your own gods, that the Lady Elfwin will not be used for this land's bane, or as pawn of war ?"

Thorkeld said to that, "I will swear that by all oaths that I may, for (as I have said before) we shall seek a far land, and you will not be vexed in such ways; but as for you, if I have your word, I will ask for no oath at all, for I know your race, and it were a mere waste. There was a time when I talked long on Derby tower with your sister, the great queen who is now dead, talking much of that which hath now come to this end. I would say that you are much like to her, if the light of this fire be a true guide, but she was more worn in the world's ways."

"As to that," the Abbess said, "I would hear more if I might, but it is an ill time to talk, and other chance there may not be. If you will let the reeve's men through, that they may save what they yet can, I will give you such surety under my own seal that all men will pass you on, and I think that those now come for whom you have burnt that which I held dear."

Thorkeld said to that, "There had been no fire, but that you rang the great bell, and had such walls that we might bring you forth in haste by no other way." — But he said no more of this for he saw where Sithric came through the fire.

The Abbess looked the same way (as she had been first to do) and she saw much.

She saw that Sithric bore one who knew not that which was done, and she saw the way that her arm hung, of which things she was glad, for the Lady Elfwin was of her own race; but she said only,

"The heart may be blithe enough, but I would look to her arm which is in a worse case," after which she turned her thought to see what could be saved, which was not much.

CHAPTER XL

The *Elfwin* tacked in a fresh wind, making ever to the French coast, not that she would win to that land, but that Thorkeld, who had the helm, would think of those two king's ships which had lain in Plym's mouth, and which he would be loth to meet.

She who had named the ship lay on its deck on a heap of skins, for she might not stand as the ship plunged, her arm being bound to her side, and to be kept with care.

Elfwin said, "I have put this to God, that I did all

that I might and that it is He that failed and not I. He is not One to fail, having will to hold; so by that He should be of our mind, and all well. Yet I pray thus, and I get no answer at all. I see that I am at your will, my arm being as it is, and that you can kiss where you will. But that I am clear of my vow is a thing which I cannot say."

Sithric said, "There is little comfort in that. I may kiss where I will, as you say, but I would that you kiss again with your heart's beat."

"But it is from that I am held by my own vow," and there was no more she would say.

Sithric put this. "Thorkeld will run in at Cork Bay where he will have two ships to meet and where he hath friends of proof.

"He is pledged that he will put us ashore if we so will, that we may wed in the Irish land.

"After that, he would sail far, for he was in Greenland three years ago, and he came on one who was sole left of a ship that had been wrecked on a strange coast, being there driven by great storms, and (at the last) having been long adrift with a broken helm, and no men left having strength to steer, had it been sound.

"But he was washed ashore to a fair land where there are hills and great woods; and from this land he went north till he came on the dwarf people of the frozen night, and by their help, whether by water or land, he came at last to the Greenland coast.

"Thorkeld would seek this land; and had I failed in

that which I most would, I was pledged that I would go too.

"Now it seems to me that this land is another world, for it can have no gods, being empty of men. If I should take you there you would be held by no vow, for it would be where your God hath no rule and He would not know what you did. We should dwell in an empty land, and could make gods to our own will."

Elfwin said to that, "Is it a sure tale ?"

"It is for each to judge, for the man is now on this ship."

"Then you shall bring him to me, for I would ever hear of a strange land. . . But, for the rest, I will tell you this. You know little of my God, (who is yours, too) if you think that we may find a land where He cannot come. But I will do this. You shall go ashore at Cork, bringing back the first priest you find, and I will put it to him, both God's side and mine, and I will hear what he shall say."

And with this Sithric must be content, for it was all that he could get as at that time.

But Gerda, who sat at Elfwin's feet with idle hands, having no silks to sew, was well pleased, for she thought that there would be chapmen from whom they could be bought in Cork.

CHAPTER XLI

Elfwin stood with her good hand on the rail, for the ship was at rest in Cork bay, and was steady enough, though pulling hard on the rope as the tide fell.

The priest stood at her side, being an old man, quiet and sad, having seen much of wrong which he could not stay, and having heard of more.

Elfwin had told her tale, putting fair words in a level scale, and the priest would say nought for a time, weighing it in his mind and not finding it to be an easy thing.

He might have said, "This is too great a matter for me. You must seek those of more power in the church," but that was not the way of the priests of that day in the wild lands, for who should be able to travel far, with a safe life, or to get letter through ?

They must act on that which they had been taught, and on such scriptures as they might have, and could read, and by their own light on the ways of God.

Now as he would not speak for so long a time, Elfwin had a great dread of what he might say at the last, and she thought of one thing that she had left untold, and that it was right he should know.

"Father," she said, at that thought, "I should have told you this. When I took vows, I knew that I had not done so had I not surely thought that Sithric was dead, and this I said in my prayers. On this thing I was

very plain to God, being never one who would lie, though I was often judged in another way.

". . . And I will tell you one more thing which is in my mind, and which it may be well that you know. If the King Sithric should have his way, and you should wed us twain, having loosed me from the vow which I made, yet would I go not ashore to this Irish land, as he may think that I will.

"For I have thought that it is too near to his own kin, and the evil which my uncle fears (and in which fear my mother died) may become a real thing.

"I have said ever that I will be no cause of war, by my own will; yet should they say 'York will open gates to her king,' how could I say that he should not go back to that which hath been his ? And were I then at his side, and were Athelstan Mercia's lord, it would have an end that none can see, yet that we may guess well.

"Therefore would I go with him to this far land, if such there be, thinking not that I shall come again to the land of my birth (which I have loved much); for I would liever far that we should be lost in a sea which may have no shore, or such as may be but the red pit into which the sun sinks at the night (for it is that way that they will steer, which may bring doubt enough to a faint heart), than that I should return to be cause of war as my mother thought, for I will have no more blood on my hands when, at the last, I shall meet God."

And at that word the priest saw her mind, and he saw

what (as he thought) were the better end, and that most pleasing to God, though he was less than sure.

He said, "Daughter, I have seen that you are in these men's hands, and if you come not to their minds they may bear you off to a savage land where you can wed not at all in a Christian way, and if he to whom I see that your heart turns be of Christian faith, and will wed you here on this deck, I will absolve you of the vow which you took, thinking him dead, and if I do wrong in this, yet is your soul clear, and it is between myself and Him whose poor servant I am."

At this Elfwin said, having a glad mind, "Then it can be done at this hour, for I think not that Sithric will be more slow than I."

But Thorkeld said, when he heard, "It should be in less time than that, for I have all aboard, and I would run out ere the tide turn, the wind being fair; and when it is done I must take boat to my own ship."

And so, by that time, he did, they having been wed on the ship's deck, putting the priest ashore, in much less than an hour's space.

"Priest," he said, "I am not of your faith, having my own dreams. Yet having more gold than I need, and going where it may be of little avail, I would give it so that it may be spent by a wise man, as I can see that you are."

The priest, who was of honest and simple mind, answered to this, "My son, I am already twice paid, both

beyond my need and my will, for the Danish prince gave with a hand that did not count, and from the Lady Elfwin I have a small thing which I value more."

"None the less," Thorkeld said, "shall you take this, for I would let you know that I am a man of blood, prone to the slaying of those who may cross my will."

The priest smiled somewhat at that, for there were ways in which he was not simple at all. Yet he took the chain of gold which Thorkeld drew from his belt, which was of six feet length.

He said, "Now I know that I have done well, of which I had before but a cold doubt. For God hath blessed me that I shall build the church to His praise, which I had thought but a dream. It shall be to the name of her through whom hath come this great gift to my hand, for I think that in all that she did she had the valour of a saint of God."

"As to that," Thorkeld answered, "she hath a will like a mule, which may be that we say the same thing, though in different speech. But that comes of her race, for they are all ill, either to bind or to drive. Yet she hath a brave heart, and it is by that she hath come through at the last. You may call her saint if you will."

And so he did, and the abbey rose by the western lakes, in the place that the priest had dreamed, having had no hope that he would help to lift its stones with his living hands, and though it hath fallen long, it had a great day, and did much good in the land.

But the *Elfwin,* having the wind abeam, beat out to the west, to the waters which (as we may think) there had been no keel to break since the world's dawn, being a small boat in a great sea.

THE END

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